CONAN RETURNS!

in Red Moon of Zembabwei by L.Sprague de Camp & Lin Carter

Also in this issue: THE KOZMIC KID a complete short novel by Richard Snead ● and THE STRONGHOLD by Mark S. Geston ●● TRACK TWO by Barry N. Malzberg

July 1974

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TED WHITE

editorial

SHORT SUBJECTS: 1. This issue, as you've undoubtedly noticed if you purchased your copy at a newsstand, we've raised our cover price to 75¢. This was, as I warned some months ago, inevitable and unavoidable. The inflationary cycle has quickened its pace in the last year with record price increases, and we are not immune to these ever-higher costs. Nothing costs what it did in 1969—the last time we raised our cover price—and sixty cents just doesn't pay the bills any more. It's unfortunate that we had to pass this increase on to you, our readers, without any complementary increase in pages, etc., but we have been absorbing increased production costs now to the point where an added 15¢—of which we get about a nickel—just catches up to our present expenses. Like the Red Queen, we must run as hard as we can just to stay in the same place.

As many of you who read the newszine, *Locus*, know, there have been a flurry of rumors over the past six months that AMAZING and FANTASTIC might be sold to another publisher. (In commenting upon these rumors, *Locus*' magazine reviewer, Tony Lewis, said, "I find it distressing that none of the rumors mention retaining the present editor who has done an excellent job within the budgetary limitations placed upon him." Lewis and I have had our differences in the past; under these circumstances I appreciate his statement. Thanks, Tony.) None of these rumors bore fruit, and at this point it does not appear that the magazines will be sold in the near future. Thus, in order to cope with still-increasing costs, a price-raise was an absolute necessity.

2. THE PRESENT ECONOMIC SITUATION does not look good. Inflation is coming to us from every direction. For the past year food prices have spiralled up at a higher rate than at any time since the post-World War Two years, and it seems unlikely they will subside again. In large measure these spiralling costs are the result of the Federal economic policies of the last two years. The recent surge in energy costs can also be laid directly at the door of

(Cont. on page 109)

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Conan made his first recent appearance in these pages in "The Witch of the Mists" (August, 1972), and reappeared in "Black Sphinx of Nebthu" (July, 1973—both, with the present novelette, a part of the eventual Conan of Aquilonia, *the eleventh of the projected twelve-volume Compleat Conan. Once again Conan pursues his implacable enemy, Thoth-Amon, this time to confront him in league with the alien serpent-god, Damballah, under the—*

RED MOON OF ZEMBABWEI

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER

1. Green Hell.

COUNT TROCERO of Poitain snatched at his saddlebow as his weary, lathered horse—a small but sturdy Stygian gray—slipped in the mud, nearly causing him to lose his stirrups. He tugged at the reins, pulling the gray's head around, and slapped at the cloud of stinging gnats that hovered before his face. He muttered a weary curse. Behind him, Pallantides, commander of the Aquilonian host, ripped out a sulphurous oath as his steed slipped in the same patch of mud.

Trocero squinted at the cloudy sky, which lay close above them. It seemed hardly to clear the tops of the tall, canelike grasses which rose to the height of a horseman's head all about them. Below, the hooves of their horses splashed through the shallow sheet of water, which lay fetlock-deep over the land. For the rainy season had come to the plains of Zembabwei, turning the country into a reeking morass.

In another fortnight the rains would have ceased. Then the water, which drained sluggishly in this flatland, would vanish. The soil would change to dry, hard-baked clay. The towering grasses would turn from green to yellow, dry out, and be swept by brush fires. But that lay in the future.

"Looks like rain," Trocero grunted to Pallantides.

The general cast a grim eye aloft. "By Set's slimy scales," he growled, "tell me something new, Count! It's rained every day for the last ten, and I've given up trying to keep the rust off my gear. How much longer will the king keep us at this back-breaking pace?"

Trocero shrugged with a saturnine grin. "You know Conan! Until it's so black an owl couldn't see its way. 'Ware serpent!" he

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snapped as his gray shied.

Pallantides jerked his reins as a mottled gray swamp viper, thick as a man's thigh, slithered among the thick stems of the grasses and vanished.

"I've had a bellyfull of this cursed swamp," the general snorted. "Gut me on the altars of Derketo, but I wish that spindle-shanked old tosspot of a druid were still with us! Belike he could magic us through the air to Old Zembabwei. Anything were better than slogging afoot through this mire! Half our horses and camels are dead or ailing, and half our men are spilling their guts with swamp fever. . . How in the forty-nine hells he expects to reach the Forbidden City in shape to fight is beyond me."

Trocero shrugged. For more than a month King Conan had driven the Aquilonian host on and on, following the course of the Styx towards its unknown source. They had trudged along the borders of eastern Stygia, where the slender ribbon of greenery along the river was flanked on either side by the golden sands of the eastern deserts. Then the river bent southward. They had traversed a parched no-man's land, where few signs of human life were to be seen save the wandering clans of the eastern Shemites, the Zuagirs, with their camels and sheep.

The host had passed beyond the bounds of Stygia and threaded its way between the kingdoms of Keshan and Punt. The desert yielded to rolling, grassy savannas, with patches of jungle in the valleys and along the streams. In southern Punt, the Styx spread out to form vast, sluggish swamps, which they had skirted for several days. Now they were approaching the borders of mysterious Zembabwei.

There had indeed been many times when Trocero could have wished that the White Druid, Diviatix, still rode with the host. A highly civilized man, the count of Poitain put little faith in magical mummeries. But there, in the sandy wastes of demon-haunted Stygia, the drunken old druid had acquitted himself well in the battle with Thoth-Amon's wizardly warriors. He alone had saved them from entrapment by the sorcerers of the Black Ring. Now that the Black Ring was crushed and Thoth-Amon himself was fled to jungle-girt Zembabwei, far to the southeast, the count could have hoped that Conan would return to many-towered Tarantia.

But no! This time, Conan was determined to run the Stygian sorcerer to earth and extinguish, once and for all, the supernatural menace to his throne. With the help of that ancient talisman, the Heart of Ahriman, the White Druid had served them well at Nebthu. But Trocero knew why Conan had let Diviatix return to the West.

Dekanawatha, the high king or warlord of the savage Picts, had

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fallen in battle. His successor, Sagoyaga, was full of bloodthirsty ambitions. He planned to league all the Pictish tribes, and their neighbors the Ligureans as well, for an invasion of the westernmost Aquilonian provinces. Only the White Druid had enough influence in those wild parts to deter the Pictish chieftain from launching his attack while the king of Aquilonia was busy elsewhere.

So Diviatix had parted from the Aquilonian host as it paused to regroup along the northern borders of Stygia, preparing for Conan's thunderbolt descent into the savannas and jungles of the far South. The Heart of Ahriman had gone with him, since it had to be returned for safekeeping to the great Mitraeum in Tarantia. Conan, no wizard, could not have used it effectively, anyway.

Ere he parted from the Aquilonian host, the druid had used his supernatural powers of divination to detect the refuge whither Thoth-Amon had fled. The Stygian's northern allies, the White Hand of Hyperborea, had been crushed by the Aquilonians at Pohiola the year before. His confederates in the Far East, the Scarlet Circle, had been disorganized by the death of their master, Pra-Eun, the god-king of fabled Angkhor.

Thus there was no refuge left for Thoth-Amon save the forbidden City of Zembabwei. There his last ally, Nenaunir, the supreme wizard-priest of Damballah, ruled three million black barbarians from his skull throne. Thither, after the debacle in the ruins of Nebthu, had Thoth-Amon fled. And thither Conan was fiercely determined to follow.

2. *Black-Winged Terror.*

TRUE TO TROCERO'S PREDICTION, the king of Aquilonia had pressed forward until darkness made it impossible to advance any further. The swift fall of the tropical night had caught them threading their way through the monstrous grasses that cloaked the boundless plain. Luckily, a nearby hummock allowed them to camp out of the far-spread sheet of shallow water. On that knoll, therefore, the army made its camp.

Cooking fires glimmered through the gloom. Fatigued Aquilonian men-at-arms cursed and grumbled, slapping insects, grooming their bedraggled mounts, and trying to dry their rotting boots. Sentries paced the margin of the swamp, exchanging curt passwords. Men sprawled, wearily scrubbing weapons and armor to keep the ever-present rust from gaining a foothold.

At the summit of the hillock rose the black tent of the king. The royal standard drooped from its pole in the steamy, motionless air.

Within, Conan stood, stripped to the waist, scrubbing mud and

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sweat from his mighty torso with hot water from a bronzen bowl. Moisture glistened in a thin sheen over his rippling thews.

Although the ruler of Aquilonia was in his late fifties, age and the civilized life of court and castle had softened his rugged physique but little. Time had streaked with gray the thick, square-cut mane of coarse black hair and the heavy mustache that swept out from his upper lip like bull's horns. It had given a touch of gauntness to his scarred, heavy-featured face and his neck. His skin, crisscrossed with the scars of many brawls and battles, had become leathery, with an occasional pucker of little wrinkles. But the mighty muscles of arm and shoulder and trunk were still firm, and the corded belly was still flat. He towelled himself dry while his pages set out, on a low folding table, a supper of broiled steak and coarse bread for himself and his son.

The army's supply of beer and wine had given out; so the host, including the king, was compelled to quench its thirst with swamp water. Conan insisted that the water be boiled before drinking. The aged philosopher Alcemides had told him that water so treated was less likely to carry disease. Conan had tried the system, approved it, and ordered it for his army, albeit it brought some grumbles and tapping of foreheads from his knights.

Throwing a loose cloak about his torso, Conan yawned, dispatched the pages, and attacked his simple repast. The exhausting days of plowing through scorching desert sands, hacking through jungles, and splashing across the endless, watery, reed-choked plain had not been without effect on him, even though they had tired him less than almost any man under his command. But, although physically fatigued, he was driven on by his unconquerable urge to have it out with his ancient foe.

Moreover, the wandering decades during which he had brawled and swaggered through a score of kingdoms, as a footloose vagabond, thief, pirate, and mercenary soldier, had given this northern barbarian a thirst for adventure and conflict which the peace of the last few years had done nothing to assuage. Thus, even when the shadow of fatigue fell upon him, he still gloried in this long trek into lands he had never seen; all the more so, because the journey bade fair to end in a final confrontation with his lifelong foe.

The tent flap was twitched aside as a youth entered. Conan grunted and waved the boy to a seat across from him. "The mounts?" he inquired gruffly.

"I've groomed them, Father. But your camel tried to bite me."

"You have to learn to handle the brutes."

Prince Conn sighed. "I miss your black Ymir."

"So do I. When we get home,

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I'll make the Kothians and Ophireans return him, if I have to turn their kingdoms inside out."

The Aquilonians' horses had been lost at Nebthu, when the Kothian and Ophirean contingents had deserted, taking the Aquilonians' mounts with them. Conan's men had been forced to use captured Stygian horses and camels after the rout of the Stygians by the Black Sphinx of Nebthu, together with some additional mounts they had bought from the Zuagirs.

Conan beamed fondly as the boy tore into the steak with his strong white teeth. Father and son clearly bore the stamp of the same lineage. The boy had the square-cut, coarse mane of straight black hair, the scowling brows, the fierce eyes of volcanic blue, and the stubborn jaw of his mighty sire. Scarce into his teens, Conn was already much taller than most Aquilonians of his own age. He still, however, lacked head and shoulder of his father's towering height.

When Conan had first led the Aquilonian army across the borders of his realm into Zingara and thence through Shem into demon-haunted Stygia, he had left his son behind in Tarantia with his family. Since the war involved a struggle against the wizards of the Black Ring, Conan urgently needed the help of the Heart of Ahriman, kept under guard in a crypt below the temple of Mitra. Hence swift messengers had been sent to Tarantia to fetch the great talisman and also to fetch Conan's heir, Prince Conn.

Conan had thereafter kept the boy near him, against all advice from his sagest councilors, who argued that the future of the dynasty should not be thus endangered. Conan felt that little was to be gained by pampering and protecting the future King of Aquilonia, except to make a weakling out of him. A future king, he firmly believed, should have the taste of battle in his guts before the heavy weight of crown responsibilities robbed him of the carefree pleasures of manslaying. Better for the next king of Aquilonia to learn of warfare in the field itself, than from dusty books and scholarly historians.

Their repast completed, the two Cimmerians were ready for rest. First, however, Conan meant to tour the camp. He would, he knew, sleep better if he knew that all was secure. He did not bother to dress. Instead, he cast off his cloak and slipped a freshly-oiled mailshirt on over his half-naked torso. He donned a leathern baldric and hauled on boots, freshly cleaned and polished by his pages. As he thrust aside the tent flap and, followed by Conn, strode out into the twilight, a sudden uproar arose.

Trumpets roared; horses screamed; feet thudded. Over all sounded a strange booming sound, which Conan could not

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identify. It reminded him, more than anything, of the boom of sails as they filled with a gusty wind—a sound familiar to him from his piratical days with the Barachan freebooters and the Zingaran buccaneers.

Just above the horizon, half obscured by damp mists, hung the pallid crescent of a sickle moon. The first stars had appeared overhead—but beneath the stars, circling and swooping to strike at running men, was a swarm of black-winged horrors. In the gathering dark, they looked like a horde of monstrous, flame-eyed bats!

3. From Time's Dawn.

ABOUT CONAN, where for a few heartbeats he stood in slack-jawed amazement, a cordon of archers was posted with shafts nocked. Straight for them hurtled a black monstrosity, as big in the body as a lion, with a long, curved neck and a serpent-like head. Its elongated jaws opened to show rows of needle-sharp fangs, and its eyes burned like coals from hell.

The batlike wings of the flying demon blotted out the sky. Straight for them swooped the monster, extending clawed, bird-like feet to grasp. As one man, the Bossonian archers drew and loosed. Arrows whistled through the night air and thudded into their target. Some sank into its broad, scaly breast, where heavy wing-muscles bulged with each downstroke of the vast pinions.

The monster voiced a hoarse screech and veered aside. As it did so, a human figure toppled from its back to thud on the earth almost at Conan's feet. The figure was that of a tall, muscular black in a plumed headdress, with a necklace of claws, a loincloth of monkey fur, and a leopard-skin cloak slung about his shoulders. The feathered butts of two Bossonian arrows, protruding from his rib cage, showed how he had died.

"Crom's blood, the things are *tame*!" roared Conan. "Shoot the riders off their backs!"

More of the dragon shapes swooped toward them, claws extended; and each carried a plumed black rider. Some of the riders hurled javelins down among the Aquilonians. A horse, disembowelled by a slash of monster-claws, screamed in its death throes; a dragon, bristling with shafts, flapped heavily away from the camp, losing altitude.

Pallantides bellowed commands. Archers took up formations. Men ran to calm the terrified horses and camels.

Conan stared at the sky. He had heard of the monstrous winged reptiles in his travels. Dim legends came drifting down from the dawn of time, of an age of reptiles that had long preceded the rise of man from the beast. Elder myths and moldering tablets in age-lost cities told of such

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monstrosities, survivors from that forgotten age—wyverns, they were called.

Another black-winged wyvern swooped toward them, its deadly claws spread wide. Conan roared his terrible Cimmerian war cry. Catching Conn by the shoulder, with a sudden thrust he hurled the boy flat. Then, setting both hands on the hilt of his great sword, he whirled it so that its blade flashed in the pallid light of the setting moon. The blade bit into the monster's neck, half severing it. Blood spurted, black in the moonlight; a rank reptilian stench filled the air.

The wyvern flapped its huge wings, one of which knocked Conan down. The flying reptile staggered through the air across the camp, to crash into one of the campfires, scattering live coals in a shower of sparks. Its dying struggles knocked men over like tenpins. The rider on its back leaped off at the moment of impact but then went down under a shower of weapons wielded by vengeful Aquilonians.

Scrambling to his feet, Conan watched the fall of the wyvern and the death of its rider. His eyes narrowed to a slitted glare. So this was the source of the legend of the flying men of Zembabwei! Terrified travelers had hinted of a monstrous horror of elder witchcraft. They spoke of topless towers with neither door nor window. Thence came the belief that the men of the forbidden city were winged like birds.

The truth, however, was just as appalling—that the Zembabwans bred and trained these survivors of a forgotten age as their steeds. By what art the black warriors effected this marvel, Conan could not guess; but it must make them almost invincible. How could any earthbound army combat winged monsters striking from the sky?

Down from the night sky hurtled the winged monstrosities, to rip asunder man or beast and rise again on beating wings before others could rally to the rescue. The darkness baffled the skill even of the Bossonian archers. As the moon set, they could not see to aim at their foes until the latter loomed suddenly close in the ruby light of the fires.

Growling a bloody oath to his primeval Cimmerian god, the king of Aquilonia rallied his man against these forces of darkness. Even as he bellowed commands, a booming of wings behind him and a rush of displaced air warned him of another attack. But before he could even turn, a tremendous blow caught him in the back. The extended claws of the wyvern closed upon him and snatched him from the surface of the ground.

As Conan gathered his wits and the wind tore past him, he realized with a silent curse that the force of the impact had knocked the sword from his hand. He clawed desperately at his girdle for the long poniard he usu-

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ally wore at his waist, but found nothing. Alas that, in his haste to check the camp's security before turning in, he had neglected to clasp about his body the broad leathern girdle, which now reposed on a folding camp stool in his tent!

Then, as he glanced at the dark ground sinking away below him, he realized that not even the dagger would have done him any good. Even if he had been able to twist his body far enough in the grip of the dragon's claws to stab the creature mortally, he was already a hundred feet above the camp. If he slew the wyvern, he would fall to his death from such a height. He thanked Crom, at least, for his shirt of ring mail, which protected his hide from the huge claws of the dragon.

From the camp, dropping beneath him, came a hoarse bellow in the voice of Amric, captain of the royal guard: "Archers, hold your shafts!"

A cry from behind him caused Conan to crane his neck to see. At the sight, he cursed again. A second wyvern was flying in tandem with the first. In its talons, like a doll borne by an eagle, was the body of Prince Conn.

"The King!" came a despairing wail from many throats below.

As the ground sank further and was lost in mist and darkness, the second wyvern drew up abreast of its fellow, affording Conan a clearer view of his son. On its back, the other beast bore a black warrior, plumed and befurred, grasping the reins in one hand and a feather-tufted spear in the other.

As Conan's gaze shifted to the burden the creature carried, young Conn waved frantically to him. It was too dark to make out expressions, while the sough of rushing air and the drumming thunder of vast wings would have drowned all speech. But Conan's answering wave carried an unspoken message.

On and on they flew. Burdened by the Cimmerian's great weight, the wyvern carrying Conan seemed to have trouble maintaining altitude. A score of times it began to sink toward the darkling plain below. Every time, a sharp command from its rider and a whack of his spear shaft sent it laboring upward again.

Weary with his exertions, Conan even dozed for a time. This did not require superhuman courage; the grip of the reptile's claws, if far from comfortable, was not acutely painful. But, where a lesser man might have been paralyzed with terror, Conan was sustained by a crude, fatalistic philosophy developed in his wandering years. According to his belief, when one's situation is utterly hopeless, one might as well not waste one's strength in worrying. Instead, one should leave one's fate to the gods and save one's strength for a more promising moment.

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4. The Topless Towers.

THE SWIFT WAXING of the tropical dawn, shining on his heavy eyelids, together with a change in the rhythm of the wyvern's laboring wings, awakened Conan. He glanced downward.

Hundreds of feet below, the grass-matted plain had given way to tropical jungle, still veiled in the purple gloom of night. On the misty horizon, the dawn lit the sky like the blaze of a furnace. A minor river snaked its way through the thick jungle. On the inner side of one serpentine curve of this stream, the greenery had been hacked down to make room for cultivated fields. And in the midst of this tract of farmland lay a fantastic city.

All of stone it was, walled about with megalithic ramparts. Inside the wall, soaring into the ruddy glow of the dawn, rose a score or more of queer, curve-walled towers, like colossal chimneys. Conan's keen gaze, raking these enigmatic structures, confirmed the legend of the towers without doors or windows. Moreover, the towers had no roofs; black emptyness yawned where their roofs would have been.

Conan felt a tingle of supernatural awe. With a sword in his strong right hand, he would fearlessly face any peril or foe. But the uncanny—the sorcerous—roused primal superstitious dread in the breast of the giant Cimmerian. The heritage of his savage ancestors awoke with him at the cold breath of the eerie and the Unknown.

His long years of wandering had carried him over much of the length and breadth of the known world. From snowy Asgard to the black kingdoms beyond Kush in the South, from the wild shores of Pictland in the West to legended Khitai in the mysterious East, he had brawled and battled and buccaneered his red road. Once, nearly twenty years before, he had briefly penetrated the kingdom of Zembabwei. He had stopped at the twin kings' northern capital to take service as a guard to a northward-bound caravan. But never had he seen the Forbidden City, Old Zembabwei itself: a city from which foreigners were rigidly excluded.

From many mouths he had heard hints and rumors of the Forbidden City in the trackless jungles to the south. There, it was said, men worshiped Set, the Old Serpent, under the name of Damballah. The black altars of Damballah ran crimson with the blood of human sacrifices. It was whispered that, on the night of sacrifice, the very moon itself burned red with the blood of those whose souls were offered up in pain and torment to the Old Serpent.

The flying wyvern descended in a slow spiral into Zembabwei. No man of the West could say for certain when this ancient city had been built. Surely it was long ago,

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perhaps before the advent of man on this planet. Legends hinted that the blood-soaked cornerstone of Old Zembabwei had been laid by the uncanny serpent-men of Valusia, those children of Set and Yig and dark Han and serpent-bearded Byatis, who had ruled the quaking fens and thick fern-jungles of the pre-human world. Kull, the great hero-king, reputed founder of Conan's own race, crushed the remnants of the serpent folk, who had outlived their age to linger into the era of Atlantis and Valusia. But that was an age ago.

Such things did not matter to Conan at this grim moment. Well he knew that the uncanny city was a haunt of primal terrors and a sink-hole of the blackest sorcery. It was a fitting lair for Thoth-Amon, the devil-priest of Stygia, to crawl to in order to lick his wounds. This, Conan thought, would be the last battle.

5. *The Skull Throne.*

ON THE HEIGHT of Old Zembabwei rose the citadel, the heart of the city, ringed about with those strangely-shapen and topless towers. At the summit of the hill, the royal palace and the temple of Damballah frowned at each other across a stone-paved plaza.

As the wyverns bearing Conan and Conn sank with thunder-beating wings to deposit their captives, the plaza was ringed by a host of stalwart blacks armed with iron-bladed spears and shields of rhinoceros hide. Gorgeous plumes of ostrich, ibis, flamingo, and other birds nodded from their shaven pates. The wind of the wyverns' wings whipped these plumes like a gale, and the blacks squinted against the dust thus stirred up.

The flying reptiles dropped their burdens to the stony pave and then, in obedience to their riders' commands, rose once more into the air. They alighted on the rims of two of the doorless towers, where more blacks seized their reins and led them out of sight below the rims. As Conan climbed stiffly to his feet and helped Conn up, he realized that the mysterious towers were nought but stables for the Zembabwans' scaly flying steeds.

Conan and the boy stared about them at the motionless ranks of black warriors, who watched with impassive faces like masks of carven ebony.

"We meet again, dog of Cimmeria," said a smooth, heavy voice.

Conan turned to face the dark, burning eyes of his old enemy.

"For the last time, jackal of Stygia," he said grimly.

Thoth-Amon stood near a great throne made of human skulls mortared together with some dark, tarry substance. The Stygian sorcerer was still a tall, powerful, commanding figure, but Conan's keen eye thought he saw signs of

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encroaching age in the swarthy, hawklike features of his greatest adversary. That visage was graven with many fine lines, and there was an expression of fatigue —even of exhaustion—in the droop of the firm mouth. The feverish glitter in those black eyes was unlike their usual catlike, unwinking concentration. The powerful body under the emerald-green robe seemed a little shrunken, stooped, and paunchy.

Conan wondered if the Thoth-Amon's mighty powers were at last on the wane. The unnatural vitality, which had for generations animated the prince of the world's black magicians, seemed to have guttered low. Perhaps the dark gods he worshiped had withdrawn their support after the debacle at Nebthu, when the White Druid, with the help of the Heart of Ahriman, had broken the Black Ring. Or, perhaps, the magical powers that had so long enabled Thoth-Amon, like a few other great magicians, to hold age at bay, had at last become exhausted, and the earthly term of the sorcerer's life was at last approaching. In any case, Thoth-Amon had begun to look old.

"For the last time, you say?" came Thoth-Amon's sonorous voice, speaking Aquilonian with scarcely a trace of accent. "So be it! From this encounter, but one shall emerge alive, and that will be myself. Nor shall we fence with words. I will slay you where you stand, and your cub beside you. Your demoralized army will be scattered by the hordes of blacks that I can summon. The West shall yet fall, and Set shall again extend his beneficient rule over the earth, when I sit as emperor in Tarantia. Prepare for death!"

Then a ringing voice broke the spell of Thoth-Amon's words: "By the spawn of Damballah, Stygian, do you forget who kings it here?"

Conan raised his eyes to the Skull Throne, whose occupant he had had time to note only briefly. It was Nenaunir, wizard-king of Zembabwei, the last of Thoth-Amon's allies. Nenaunir was a towering black, whose mighty-muscled breast gleamed in the ruddy rays of dawn like oiled and polished ebony. His cold eyes stared down at them like the ice from some frozen hell.

The Stygian halted, and Conan thought that he visibly paled under his dusky hue. He faltered for words, and Conan sensed a tension between the two mighty princes of black magic. A rivalry for supremacy had emerged from the smashing of the world-wide league of sorcerers, which Thoth-Amon had forged with his cunning and Conan had broken with his strength.

The Stygian wilted. "I—of course, brother, you are supreme here. But. . .our minds hold the same great scheme of empire. You shall rule the South; I, the West. We shall divide the world,

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which shall henceforth grovel before Father Set. . ."

"Before Lord Damballah, whose prophet and vicar on this plane I am!" thundered the majestic black. "Remember your place, Stygian. The Slithering God has forsaken you at last. Your day is done, and I see no reason to share the empire of the world with such as you. Mayhap I will appoint you regent or governor of one of the provinces my armies will carve—if you behave yourself. But walk softly! I alone will decree the death of this white devil."

The deep voice of Nenaunir, speaking the simplified Shemitish that was the trade language among the northerly black nations, ceased. A thousand blacks broke their silence to ring the butts of their spears against the stone.

In the ensuing silence, the witch-king of Zembabwei turned his icy gaze from the wasted form of Thoth-Amon to where Conan stood with arms folded calmly on his mighty breast. The young prince stood brave-faced beside his sire.

"As for you, white dog," intoned the black king, "you have indeed erred by entering my realm. We met in Louhi's castle in Hyperborea. You won free because Louhi hesitated to have you slain, hoping to use you as a weapon against this Stygian and thus to rise to supreme command of the world's magicians. While she spun her web of guile, you won free and destroyed her. You also destroyed Thoth-Amon's power in Stygia. But I shall not repeat their errors, for I have naught to fear from the Stygian and little to gain from his friendship. I am king here, and I alone shall pronounce your doom. Think not to escape again."

Conan said nothing, but his blazing eyes boldly met the chill glare of Nenaunir.

"We shall look upon each other one last time," continued the other grimly, "on the Night of the Red Moon. When the moon turns red, your blood shall run scarlet on the altars of the Slithering God, whilst your soul goes shrieking forth to feed the hunger of Damballah."

"When is all this to take place?" asked Conan calmly.

Nenaunir turned his head. "Rimush!" he boomed.

"Aye, Your Majesty?" a small, stooped, elderly Shemite in an astrologer's worn, patched robe, embroidered with faded symbols of his craft, stepped out of the ranks and bowed low.

"When comes the Night of the Red Moon?"

"According to my calculations, it will occur—if some god interferes not—twelve nights from the one just past, sire."

"There is your answer, white dog. Now take them away to the pits!"

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6. The Pits of Zembabwei.

THE PITS OF Zembabwei were dungeon cells cut deeply into the bedrock below the ancient city. A party of black warriors escorted Conan and the boy thither through narrow, winding corridors lit only by the guttering flare of oil-soaked torches. From the curious angles and proportions of the passage, Conan guessed that the old myths were true; that it had indeed been the mysterious serpent-folk of pre-human times who had first raised the city of Old Zembabwei—or at least had laid the foundations on which the present city was built. He had seen that strangely-angled masonry twice before in his long career: once in a ruined castle on the grassy plains of Kush; and again, years later, on the Nameless Isle in the uncharted Western Ocean, far to the south of the usual tracks of merchantmen, naval fleets, and piratical marauders.

The cell that Conan and his son were to share was narrow and damp. Moisture leaked from the mold-crusted walls of black, age-pitted stone. The floor was strewn with filthy, moldy straw. A large rat squeaked and scuttled out the door between the feet of the men entering the cell. The air was heavy with the stench of decay.

Into this cubicle they were thrust, and a barred grill of heavy bronze clanged shut behind them. The officer of the squad of black warriors locked the door with a great key, and the escort departed with a soft padding of naked feet.

As soon as the warriors had gone, Conan prowled the cage, searching the pitted stones of the walls with probing fingers, testing the bronze bars, green with age, with a surge of his powerful thews. There was no window; the only light was a feeble one from a torch in a wall bracket at the last bend in the corridor.

Young Conn slumped in the driest corner and tried not to show his fatigue and despondency. He was also tormented by hunger and thirst; but, imitating his father, he set his face into an impassive mask of grim determination. Conan's thirteen-year-old son would rather have gone to the stake than show fear before his sire.

Having examined the cell and found no means of exit, Conan kicked the driest straw together in a corner and stretched out with a huge yawn beside his son. He wrapped an arm around the lad for warmth and comfort.

After a little while, Conn asked: "What will they do with us, Father?"

Conan shrugged. "I know what they *think* to do with us, boy; but what may come to pass might be somewhat different. Remember, half the army of Aquilonia is on its way here at this very moment. I doubt not that Pallantides is pushing his men through the jungle at a pace that would slay

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less sturdy wights. The Night of the Red Moon is nearly a fortnight away, and much may happen ere then."

Conn whispered: "They're going to sacrifice us to Set, aren't they?"

"So they think," Conan grunted. "But it is not up to them, damn their black hides. 'Tis up to the gods, as the yammering priests would say—or to that shadowy Fate, which, some philosophers tell us, rules gods and mortals alike. As for me. . ."

"Yes, Father?"

"I dozed poorly in the claws of that wyvern-monster, and I could do with a bit of rest." Conan yawned and stretched out his long legs.

Conn sighed and smiled a little in the darkness. It was impossible to feel fearful or gloomy for long in the presence of his father. It was not that his mighty sire was an optimist, but that he did not brood at length on dangers to come. Instead, he adjusted himself to circumstances as they arose and made the best of things, trusting to the future to bring a more favorable turn of fortune. Besides, Conan was already snoring loudly.

Conn's head drooped on his father's massive shoulder. Before long he, too, slept as deeply as his sire.

A DEEP, SEPULCHRAL GROAN aroused the huge Cimmerian from his exhausted slumbers. Instantly he came to full alertness, like a beast of the jungle aroused by the approach of an animal of a hostile species.

Sliding his arm out from under his son, Conan rose and glided across the cell. There he stood, listening keenly at the barred door. Again sounded that despairing groan, followed by labored breathing. At this repetition of the sound, Conn also awoke. He lay still, searching the gloom with keen young eyes. The boy had too much presence of mind to speak aloud.

From the edge of his barred door, Conan could see a little way down the corridor and into the nearest cell across the way. As his eyes fathomed the gloom, he made out the form of a gigantic black trussed to the farther wall. Stripped naked, his body striped with the weals of a recent flogging, the black hung from the wall in his chains as if crucified.

As Conan perceived these details, the sweat-smeared chest of the Negro heaved convulsively. Again he groaned, rolling back his head. The feeble torchlight from the corridor caught the whites of his eyes. From his long experience with dead and dying men, Conan surmised that this man was near the end of his strength.

"Why have they bound you thus?" Conan demanded in a low but penetrating voice, speaking first in the Skemitish trade language and then repeating his question in Kushite.

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"Who speaks?" inquired the bound man in a slow, weary voice.

"A fellow prisoner. I am Conan, king of Aquilonia to the north," replied the Cimmerian, seeing no point in deception.

"I am Mbega, king of Zembabwei," said the crucified man.

7. *A Tale of Two Kings*

THE BLACK had been greatly weakened by his ordeal, but Conan at length elicited his tale of treachery and devil-worship.

The black warriors of Zembabwei, it seemed, were an offshoot of the Kchaka, a black nation of the interior driven from their homes by a stronger tribe. The Zembabwan branch of the Kchaka had fled eastward until they reached the ancient, crumbling ruins of an unknown city, where they settled. The nearby tribes, holding the land to be accursed, avoided the river valley wherein lay these ruins. Hence the newcomers were able to settle undisturbed and to build a new city on the ruins of the old, which they named for their tribe of Zembabwei.

For many years, their only foes were wyverns who soared over the jungle from cave-lairs in a range of mountains farther east. A hero-chief of the tribe, by obtaining eggs of these creatures and rearing them in captivity, discovered that they could be tamed and trained as aërial steeds. This weapon enabled the Zembabwans to extend their rule over the neighboring tribes and form the present kingdom of Zembabwei.

This hero, Lubemba, had been one of a pair of twins and had been very close to his brother. When he announced a revelation from the gods, that the Zembabwans should henceforth be ruled by pairs of twins, so great was his prestige that none protested. Lubemba's brother was accordingly enthroned beside him.

Ever since, the land had been ruled by twin kings. To avoid conflicts over the succession, the rule was that, when one of the pair died, the other was compelled to slay himself or was hunted out of the country. After the end of each such duel reign, the priests by divination chose a pair of healthy twin boys from amongst the people and proclaimed them the monarchs of the next reign.

All had gone well with the young nation until the dual reign of Nenaunir and Mbega. Nenaunir had fallen in with a cult of devil-worshipers, whose ancient brotherhood dated back three thousand years, to the age of Acheron, kingdom of shadows. The demon-god Set, or Dambballah as the Negroes called him, promised greatness to Nenaunir and his people if they would turn from their tribal gods and worship him, the Slithering God.

The conversion of the young king had torn the nation into fac-

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tions, one faithful to Mbega and the old gods, the other made up of adherents of the Old Serpent and his vicar, Nenaunir. Since most of the chiefs and younger warriors had joined the new cult, there was a likelihood of bloody civil war between the factions. Rather than see the kingdom rent assunder and drowned in blood, Mbega abdicated his royal powers in favor of Nenaunir. He would have lived peacefully as just another subject, had not Nenaunir embarked on a course of seizing and killing those of Mbega's faction who had been outspoken in their opposition to Nenaunir and his new god.

So Mbega and his remaining followers had risen in revolt. But this revolution, being too little and too late, aborted. The forces of the former king had been crushed in an ambush, and his sacred person had been seized.

His capture, however, had presented a problem to Nenaunir. The latter could have easily had Mbega killed. But the law of the Zembabwan kingdom stated that, when one of a pair of royal twins died, the other should be slain or driven out. Nenaunir knew that his brother still had many thousands of partisans. If necessary, these would rise to see that the old law was obeyed—the more so because Damballah's insatiable appetite for human sacrifices had destroyed much of Nenaunir's early popularity.

Nenaunir's solution was to imprison Mbega for life, bringing him out to display to the people on state occasions. This policy disarmed Mbega's faction, whose leader was held hostage by his opponent.

Nenaunir, however, wreaked an occasional private vengeance on his brother. On a recent occasion, when Mbega was taken out and paraded before the people, Nenaunir had demanded that Mbega make a speech proclaiming his allegiance to Nenaunir and urging his followers to do likewise. Instead, Mbega had defied his brother and spat in his face. Hence the flogging.

Mbega was safe for the present, Conan surmised, since Nenaunir did not yet feel strong enough on his Skull Throne to risk upsetting the ancient law of dual kingship. If he were to blind or maim Mbega, the fact could not be hidden the next time he must put his captive on display.

As the crucified black related his grim narrative, he seemed to grow stronger, as the fires of his fury fed his lowered vitality. Conan saw that the man was a splendid specimen of savage manhood, thewed like a gladiator. That iron physique could absorb punishment and survive where a softer, city-bred man from more civilized lands would have died long since.

"Do you still have many strong, united followers?" the Cimmerian asked.

The black king nodded. "Many

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are still sworn to my service, and many who were Nenaunir's men have turned against him. They have deserted him because of his cruelties, his flouting of our ancient laws, and his slaughter of their fellows in the sacrifices. Could I but escape for an hour, I could raise an army to storm the citadel and drag the witch-king from his throne. But what use to speak of that? Our position is hopeless here."

"Time will tell," said Conan with an enigmatic smile.

9. Through the Black Gate.

PALLANTIDES CRAWLED THROUGH the thick grasses to the edge of the river, the stench of rotting vegetation thick in his nostrils. Wriggling like a snake, the Aquilonian general worked his way up to where Count Trocero lay peering between a pair of close-set tree trunks. The Poitanian looked back at his comrade, his sensitive, aristocratic face and pointed gray beard smeared with oily mud. Sweat ran down his face from under the brim of his light helmet and cut runnels through the grime.

"Sentries on the walls," Trocero whispered. "Guard posts on the towers. This will be a hard nut to crack."

Pallatides, thoughtfully chewing his mustache, looked the scene over. The immense walls of Zembabwei were strongly built, and his practised eye told him that it would take months of siege to force an entry. They must needs fell trees to build catapults and other siege engines. . .

A black shadow fell upon them. The general dug himself deeper into the ferns and waited, sweating. Overhead, one of the bat-winged horrors that had attacked them in the swampy plain, ten days before, floated across the walls. They could see the plumed warrior mounted between the throbbing wings. A shudder of revulsion shook him.

"Blood of Dagon!" he growled. "If Nenaunir can tame those winged horrors, no wonder he holds a grip on his folk. Look yonder!"

The reptile fluttered down to one of the doorless towers and vanished out of sight over its lofty rim.

"So that's the secret of the towers!" muttered Trocero. "That is where the wyverns go to roost, like bats in a cave!"

"To Moloch's flames with the devils," grunted Pallantides. "We have a king and a prince to rescue."

"How can you be sure they are within those walls?"

"Fangs of Nergal, 'tis as plain as a mole on a dancing girl's arse!" retorted Pallantides. "Thoth-Amon's only ally is this Nenaunir, who kings it yonder, and the wizard's flying devils pluck king and prince from our midst. Whither should they take them

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but to the capital?"

"Alive?"

"That we shall find out once we are within those walls."

Trocero sighed. "You've had more experience with sieges than I; but to me those walls look impregnable."

"To an army, yes; but not to a lone man."

Trocero eyed the general. "You have a plan?"

The general ran a muddy hand over his stubbled jaw. "D'ye recall the Zingaran noble, Murzio?"

"That sly little turncoat? What of him?"

"Sly as a weasel in truth, but a good poniard-man and a faithful Aquilonian knight, for all that I misdoubt his patent of nobility. I think he was spawned in the gutters of Kordava; but no matter. Conan favors him because of a good turn his father did Conan in his buccaneering days. You recall that, three years since, the king invited to court his old friend Ninus—"

"The priest of Mitra? Aye! Our king, forsooth, has some rascally old-time comrades, but none so iniquitous as that spindle-shanked old tosspot!"

Pallantides chuckled. "True enough! You know how Ninus swaggered about the court by day, as pious as a patriarch, and how by night he wallowed in the wineshops and stews. Well, he and Murzio became thick as thieves. Conan wishes to employ Murzio on a spying mission and persuaded Ninus to teach him his thievish tricks. Murzio proved an apt pupil. Conan sent him to Shem, where he uncovered a budding conspiracy among the king of Ophir and some of the Shemitish kinglets. Moreover, he brought back documents and other evidence that enabled Conan to crush the plot ere it got started.

"For this, Conan knighted Murzio. These Zingarans are a treacherous lot but wholehearted. Win one to you, and he's your man to the last drop of his blood; and thus it is, I pray, with this Murzio."

"Well, what has this to do with getting into Zembabwei?"

Pallantides winked. "There's one unguarded gate to every great city: the sewers."

"Sewers? The jungles have addled your wits, man! A barbarous place like this would not have sewers."

"Ah, but it has; belike they date back to pre-human times. Do you see that trickle of ooze emerging from the grill along the southwest wall?" Pallantides pointed.

"Aye."

"To judge from the stench wafted hither on the breeze, that is the outlet for the sewers of Zembabwei. For their jakes to empty thereinto, the blacks must have built underground tunnels connecting with that underground stream—or, mayhap, used a system already there; for I suspect

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that this city is built on the ruins of an older one. Now, if there be one man in our army who can worm his way through that grill, it were Murzio, who is slim as an eel and thrice as slippery."

Trocero scratched his imperial—once neatly trimmed, now shaggy and muddy—and said: "I perceive your scheme, my friend. He'll worm his way in, knife or sandbag the guards, and unbar the gate for us in the dark of the night."

"You have my plan in full, noble Count. And the best part of it is the sewers. It does my heart good to think of that fastidious, long-nosed Zingaran up to his nostrils in foulness. Never have I had much heart for Zingarans, since I caught a troubadour of that persuasion in bed with my wife! My *late* wife, I mean."

Trocero grinned. "Let's return to camp and inform the noble Murzio how fate had chosen him to be the savior of his king," he chuckled.

"Oh, no you don't!" said Pallantides. "I am fain to be the one to tell him!"

HOURS LATER, as purple darkness spread across the walls and towers of Zembabwei, a slim, graceful figure in black slipped from the edge of the jungle and swam noiselessly across the river. At the other side, it sought the reeking rivulet that flowed from the grill beneath the frowning walls. A few strokes more brought it to the obstacle. For a moment it lingered, seeking an entrance. Then it slid within and vanished from sight.

Murzio may or may not have possessed the noble blood he claimed. But when he swore fealty to a king, he was that king's man to the end.

9. *Red Moon.*

THE GHOSTLY LIGHT of the full moon shone down slantwise into the streets of Old Zembabwei. None slept in the city, for this was the Night of the Red Moon. When the ominous change passed over the heavenly orb, King Nenaunir would invoke his sinister god, whose altar would run scarlet with the gore of human sacrifices even as the moon reflected that same sanguinary hue.

Torchlit processions moved through the narrow, winding streets of the ancient city. The thud of drums throbbed through the hot, black night. Weird chants arose.

In the pits of Zembabwei, Conan prowled his cell alertly, like a great cat. Prince Conn watched. He, too, had counted the days and the nights by keeping track of the number of times the prisoners were fed. The night they had broken the hosts of Stygia before the outstretched paws of the Black Sphinx of Nebthu, there had been a new moon in the sky. Nearly a month and a half—forty-one days, to be

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exact—had elapsed since then. Conn's tutors had seen to it that he well knew the moon's phases, since he would some day rule a mighty kingdom of farmers. So tonight the moon would rise full, and his father had told him that an eclipse of the moon never occurred save on the night of the full moon.

So tonight, unless some unknown force intervened, he and his sire would die a hideous death on Damballah's black altars.

Even at this depth, the eery throb of jungle drums came to their ears in a slow, maddening rhythm. Far above their cell, thousands of Nenaunir's savage followers were working themselves into a pitch of blood-lust for the rites that would attend the coming of the Red Moon.

Conan had more than once tested his strength against the bars of their cell, until his palms were raw. Each time, however, he had relaxed his grip, panting. His ears rang and his face was crimson with the effort. But the bars were too thick for even his superhuman strength. The builders of the cell had calculated well. Old and corroded though they were, these bars, more than an inch thick, were beyond the strength of mortal man to wrench askew.

At that instant, Conan's keen eye caught a moving shadow. It was but a glimpse—a clot of gliding darkness more substantial than a mere shadow. Conan froze, staring out into the gloomy corridor. A narrow, sallow face floated against the darkness—a familiar face.

"Sir Murzio, is't you, or do I dream?" whispered Conan.

" 'Tis I indeed, my liege," replied a soft whisper.

"How in Crom's name came you here? What of the host? Are they camped nearby? And how come you by that stink?"

The Zingaran smiled wearily, his lean, fine-boned face tense with excitement. In a swift, low tone he narrated his adventures.

"But," he added in tones of despair, "the sewers leading to the streets above were mere tubes, too narrow even for me to enter. I discovered this system of passages and followed it hither; but the exits therefrom are heavily guarded. I have found you, sire; but I have failed of my mission. I cannot get to the gates to open them for the army."

Conan digested this news. "Mayhap all is not lost," he growled. "Have you a pick-lock? Once out of this cage, we should have at least a fighting chance."

Murzio produced a length of bent wire and began working on the mechanism of the lock. The distant torches shone on beads of perspiration on the Zingaran knight's forehead. For a time there was no sound save that of human breath and the faint click of metal on metal.

At last Murzio looked up, despair again overlying his features.

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"Father Ninus himself could not spring this lock, sire! I think it accursed."

Conan grunted. "That may well be true. Trust the jackal of Stygia to have enchanted the lock of my cell! That crafty devil knows that I have escaped from more than one lockup. What of the lock on the cell to my left? The prisoner therein is a friend."

The black-clad figure set to work on the lock of Mbega's cell. The chained black watched in silence with impassive features. Presently the lock clicked open. Conan released a long-pent breath in a sigh of relief.

Murzio entered Mbega's cell and soon released the dethroned king of Zembabwei from his chains. The knight helped the majestic Negro to limp out into the corridor, his slim form bent under Mbega's great weight. Conan watched in grim silence as the kingly black massaged life back into his numb extremities.

Again Murzio tried, in vain, to open the lock on Conan's cell. Again Conan essayed, with the help of the other three, to bend the bars of his cell, but without success.

"You Zembabwans build a stout cell door," he gasped. "No matter. What cannot be cured must be endured."

"But you face death," said Mbega heavily.

Conan shrugged with a wolfish grin. "Not for the first time, my friend."

"What can I do?" asked Murzio.

"First, slip me yon poniard at your belt. The blacks have stripped me nigh naked, but at least they left me my boots." Conan slid the long blade into his right boot.

"Now help Mbega out of here. Perchance he knows a route through this maze to the surface. Help him to find haven with such of his supporters as still live. Mbega, this is your last chance. If your friends can rise before the hour of sacrifice and open the south gate to my army, we may yet outlive the dawn.

"Murzio, whether we succeed or fail, you have my thanks. You are a brave and loyal man. If we survive tonight's perils, ask me for the barony of Castria. Fare you well! Go swiftly, and Crom and Mitra go with you."

The two dark figures merged with the denser shadows beyond the lighted area and were gone. Conan clapped Conn's shoulder.

"Be of good cheer, son," he growled. "A friend within the walls is worth ten thousand locked outside them."

He fell silent again as he heard the pad of naked feet approaching along the corridor from the other direction. He knew, then, that their hour was upon them—the hour that would mean either the fulfillment of Thoth-Amon's revenge, or the fall of a kingdom.

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10. The Slithering One.

CONAN AND HIS SON were bound with massive leathern thongs and escorted from the pits by a party of black warriors. They came out into the great plaza between the palace and the temple. The silver buckler of the full moon already rode high in the sky, its brilliant light rendering the stars few and wan.

The plaza was ringed with standing stones, crudely chiseled with strange glyphs in an unknown symbology. Whether this had been done by Zembabwan wizards or by their prehuman predecessors, Conan could not say.

To one side, before the temple of Damballah, a sinister idol rose against the sky. Carven of black basalt, it rose to thrice the height of a man, as tall as the sinister ring of monoliths. As Conan was led towards this eidolon, he perceived that it had been fashioned into the likeless of a tremendous serpent, coiled into a conical shape. The wedge-shaped, ophidian head stared down from the top of the cone. For an instant the thing seemed to live, as its scarlet eyes gleamed with cold malignancy. But then Conan saw that the eyes of the Serpent God were merely gigantic rubies, and that their lifelikeness was due to the reflection of the flickering torchlight.

Conan repressed a shudder. The idol of Set—or Damballah as the Zembabwans called it—had from time immemorial represented the forces of darkness and evil on earth. He muttered a prayer to Crom. That aloof Cimmerian god meddled but seldom in the ways of men and cared little for worship by men. But, when the demon of the Ultimate Abyss glares down with eyes of lambent scarlet flame from its height, any god is better than none.

The altar of Damballah was like a great bowl of black marble, set into the pavement before the idol. Bronze rings were let into the marble. Conan and Conn were bound at the bottom of the depression by chains in such a fashion that they were helpless but standing upright. Their leathern thongs were removed.

Conan studied the situation. His chains and wrist-cuffs were of new bronze and presumably unbreakable. But the rings set in the marble looked to be centuries old and deeply eaten by corrosion.

When the captives had been tethered, the black priests of Set withdrew. Silence fell. The night wind from the jungle moaned through the circle of standing stones and made the torches flutter. The red eyes of the statue burned through the gloom with an uncanny semblance of life.

Across the square, the bowed, wasted figure of Thoth-Amon stood beside King Nenaunir. The black monarch was in full regalia, with a purple robe to his feet and

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his face concealed by a serpent mask. His right hand, flashing with talismanic rings, grasped his serpent-headed staff of conjuration.

The silence lengthened. Then thousands of heads turned upwards, and a long-drawn "Ah-h-h!" came from the throats of the massed Zembabwans. Conan looked up, too. A red shadow with a curved leading edge had begun to creep across the face of the moon.

The drums, which had been silent, began again, beating a complex, febrile rhythm. They thudded like a giant's pulse. The jungle mists, coiling overhead, seemed to writhe and coil in time with the beat. The jeweled eyes of the Serpent God appeared to blink and flash in time with the same throbbing. The red shadow spread further. It was time to act.

Locking his hands about the chain that secured his right wrist, Conan whipped about and threw all his weight against the chain. Ten thousand blacks watched him with bleak, indifferent eyes. Bands of muscle stood out along his back and shoulders, back, and arms in one great effort. The chain held, but the old ring sunk in the marble elongated and snapped.

One hand free, Conan spun, slamming his full weight against the other chain. His brows congested, knotting with effort. His eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets; his lips drew back in a bestial snarl. The second ring, distorted, broke with a ringing crack.

Any instant, Conan expected to feel the thudding blow of an arrow or a javelin in his back. But naught occurred. The blacks watched him free himself with stolidly indifferent faces.

With his pulse pounding in his ears, Conan turned to Conn. The red shadow crept further, the drumming changed its beat, and a booming chant arose from the massed thousands.

Emulating his father, young Conn strained at his shackles but without effect. Conan bent to his son's aid, conscious of a sudden arctic chill. A breath of icy wind blew against his nape. So cold was it that the sheen of perspiration on his back froze on the instant into icy granules.

Conscious of this uncanny icy breath upon him, Conan saw a strange sight. The scarlet shadow had now overspread much of the moon's disk. But, above the plaza, the steamy vapors swirled, congealing from the breath of interstellar cold that blew down from the sky, where the Red Moon blazed like a cyclopean eye. The vapors thickened, taking on shape and substance—the shape and substance of a tremendous, writhing serpent.

Fear clawed at Conan's vitals. Now he knew the meaning of the bowl-shaped altar, and why they had been chained upright. As the first cold coil of the semi-solid

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vapor settled about him, he realized the full horror of the doom that Nenaunir had planned for them.

For Damballah himself was materializing on this earthly plane, and the coils of the Father of Evil would soon fully condense from empty air, first to crush them both to pulp and then to feed on their shuddering souls.

11. Moon of Blood

IGNORING THE COLD that bit through him, the giant Cimmerian threw his full strength against the last chain that bound his son to the altar. The brazen ring broke with a crack.

The insubstantial coils were heavy about Conan now. They weighed down his brawny limbs, and their interstellar cold struck deep into his hot core of vitality. With effort, he bent and drew from his boot the poniard that Murzio had given him. He sank the weapon to the hilt in the thickening coils that encumbered his body.

"Father!" cried Conn, glimpsing the demonic thing that Nenaunir had conjured from transgalactic hells.

"Run, boy!" gasped Conan. "The gates! Save yourself and try to let the army in!"

Again and again, Conan drove the dagger into the massive coils. Although his stabs bit deep, they did not seem to hurt the apparition slowly solidifying about him. Scales like saucers rasped against his hide. He staggered under the incredible weight of the monstrous serpent. Far above, Damballa's wedge-shaped head swayed against the burning moon, while eyes of scarlet flame locked into his own.

A cruel, cunning, malignant intelligence lay behind those reptilian eyes; a vast weariness, an endless despair, and a bottomless hunger. Conan's soul qualied as he stared into the eyes of the demon that, for a million years, had striven to trample his race back into the mud from which it had slowly and painfully emerged.

The cold was bone-deep now. The weight of the shifting coils was crushing. Slowly the first coil tightened about his chest, squeezing heart and lungs as in a vise. The hand that held the poniard went numb, and the dagger fell to tinkle on the marble.

Conan fought on, but no longer was it a mere struggle of flesh with flesh. Now it was a battle of indomitable wills, pitted in a struggle of the spirit alone, on some plane of consciousness alien to Conan. It seemed to Conan that his mind, will, and soul formed an extension of his body. He threw the vigor of his unbroken will against the spiritual negativity of the serpent-demon, as he might hurl a javelin against a foe of flesh and blood.

He was no longer conscious of his body, which was benumbed

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from head to heel. In a dim way, he knew that he still stood upright, tangled in the tightening coils of the Great Serpent. His heart was slowing, his muscles were locked in the rigor of approaching death, and the very blood was congealing in his veins. But deep within him lay an untapped core of strength, on which he drew. Into the shadowy battle of wills he threw his courage, his manhood, and his very lust for life. Against this last, the demon had no weapon, for it was a thing of death and decay; its compelling lust was to destroy all life.

But the strength of the serpent god was colossal, like the force that holds mountains erect and sustains the planet in its course. It hurled against its adversary the cold breath of fear, cowardice, and self-doubt. There were the weapons of the Abyss. With them, Damballah sapped the manhood of heroes, poisoned patriots with the venom of treachery, and drank the souls of nations and empires.

The cold intelligence of that transmundane being knew that it would in time destroy the earth and quench the fires of the very sun. Now it hurled that invincible vampiric force against a single mortal man. No living thing, however brave, could stand against the leeching power that drains the strength of suns.

Conan's mind darkened, his consciousness faded, but his sheer instinct for survival kept him fighting with every ounce of power his soul possessed. He fought on against the darkness that sucked him down into the abyss of nothingness, while the red moon leered down and King Nenaunir laughed.

12. Death in the Night.

SUDDENLY, the deathly cold that numbed Conan's body lessened. The crushing pressure on his body lightened. The exhaustion that clouded his brain faded before a surge of fresh vigor.

He came slowly to himself. He was lying on his back at the bottom of the marble bowl, staring up at friendly, twinkling stars. The moon, once again a disk of lucid silver, poured its light down upon him.

An uproar brought him to his feet, only to sink dizzily back to his knees. His full strength had not yet returned. When he could bring himself erect once more, he saw an amazing sight.

A few paces from the edge of the marble bowl lay Nenaunir, struck down in his hour of triumph. Beside him, gleaming in the moonlight, lay the poniard that Murzio had given to Conan, and which Conan had dropped in his struggle with the demon-god. Beyond, struggling in the clutches of terror-smitten blacks, stood the assassin.

It was Prince Conn, disheveled and panting. The boy glared like a

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beast of prey from under touseled hair. Freed from his chains by Conan's last effort, the lad had not fled as ordered. He had, instead, picked up the fallen dagger and flung himself across the square to where Nenaunir stood, the eyes in his serpent mask ablaze with blood-lust and triumph. All eyes were fixed upon the cosmic struggle in the black marble bowl, and none but Thoth-Amon had seen Conan's son make his suicidal charge against the entranced wizard-king of Zembabwei.

Thoth-Amon had stayed his hand for a fatal instant of hesitation, while jealousy struggled with prudence. That second was enough; the dagger was buried in Nenaunir's heart, and the vicar of Damballah lay sprawled in his blood. The spell that sustained Damballah on the earthly plane was broken in time to rescue Conan's withering soul from extinction. Above the bowl of sacrifice, the serpent form dissolved again into formless vapor, and Conan lived.

Before the blacks who seized Conn could make up their minds whether to stay him on the spot, a howling horde of black warriors erupted from the side streets and attacked the worshipers of Damballah from all sides. The dense, orderly lines of Nenaunir's men melted into chaos, while noncombatants raced madly for safety. Leaderless, the partisans of Nenaunir, easily distinguished by their plumed headdresses, went down by scores.

A brazen trumpet rang over the plaza, and the tramp of booted feet sounded. Conan grinned; his Aquilonians had come. He staggered through the wrack of combat and gasped out orders to his men. He saw Mbega, followed by a hundred partisans, dropping from the roof of one of the low buildings beside the square and racing into the fray with spear and ax and war-club.

Then the square resounded with a clatter of dropped spears, as hundreds of Nenaunir's men threw away their weapons and groveled on the pavement, begging for mercy. Mbega rushed from group to group to stop the general slaughter.

Conan stood on half-numb legs. He staggered as Conn rushed across the square and threw himself into his father's arms. Conan hugged him briefly, spoke a gruff word of comfort, and looked around for Thoth-Amon.

The Stygian sorcerer was not to be seen. Presently a wyvern spread its batlike wings and soared out from the top of one of the towers. A swarthy man in a green robe sat astride the winged reptile. The monster circled the doomed city once, then flew off into the south. No eye but Conan's marked it in its flight. And as he watched, his brows grew together in a thoughtful scowl. South lay nothing but countless leagues of jungle, and the terminus of the continent it-

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self, where a nameless beach fronted an unknown sea. That southernmost point of land was the edge of the known world, as far as anyone could say. Thoth-Amon had lost his final ally; he was alone, now, having lost even the favor of his merciless god. He could flee no further, Conan grimly knew. There was no place left for him to go.

Conan had been wrong, earlier. The last battle was not here among the topless towers of forbidden Zembabwei. It would be fought on a nameless beach at the World's Edge.

Hugging Conn to him, soothing his hysteric tears, Conan staggered out of the altar-bowl and stood, deeply wearied but smiling, to await the approach of Pallantides and Trocero. Before dawn reddened the eastern sky, a king would return to his throne and the last followers of the prophet and vicar of Damballah would perish. Conan would crown Mbega with his own hands; then the army must rest here in Zembabwei a while and lick its wounds, until it was restored to full fighting vigor after the long trek through swamp and jungle.

Then south—south to the world's edge—and the final battle with Thoth-Amon.

Conan grinned, deep chest expanding, drinking in the fresh night air, feeling the blood surge through his mighty frame, feeling the vigor well up in him again.

Crom, but it felt good to be alive!

—L. Sprague de Camp
& Lin Carter

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Nothing you have ever read in this magazine will prepare you for the story which follows. Its author describes it, none too facetiously, as "A schizoid journey to the pancreas of the Pinball Dream." It is a novel (complete in this issue) of the New Myth—a blending of the drug culture of the last decade and the metaphor of the Pinball Machine—a trip into the surreal in which subjective fantasy merges with objective reality. It is a nerve-jolting experience. Once read it cannot be forgotten.

THE KOZMIC KID

or

THE QUEST FOR THE INESTIMABLE SILVER BALL

RICHARD SNEAD

IT WAS MIDNIGHT at Pancho's Pinball Palace, and I was bored shitless. . .counting cracks in the concrete floor, blink-blink amid the smoke. Trying half-heartedly to put the make on a flat-chested runaway in a Rolling Stones tee-shirt, for lack of something better to do, when this kid came walking in thru the door. Or maybe 'walking' isn't precisely the word I mean—darted, more like it, with a blurred, flick-quick motion, a speedy snake's tongue step. He was quick and little, and walked like he was on springs, jumping and bouncing, rolling his shoulders back and forth like they were on ball bearings.

I followed with my eyes (not knowing why) as he went scurry-sliding over to the old Four Million BC, thumbing in a coin and starting it up. A tiny, tattered figure, in blue jeans and desert boots, in the grip of a shiny electronic miracle—chrome steel, glass and plastic. Precision and cold, gleaming sterility, matched against the enigmatic little figure that radiated such a quick, animal tension. Food for thought, that.

I bid adieu to the almost-ugly hippie chick, fixing my eyes on the scoring panel, with its lush green background, and two phrehistoric creatures engaged in what looks like a battle to the death. (The BC, for those of you not familiar with it, is a Bally machine, one of the best. It is an earlier prototype of the Fireball, which it in many ways resembles. It features a 3000 point scoring ramp device, multiple plays via two traps, the Volcano, and the Tar Pit, which capture and hold the ball, releasing a free ball in

Illustrated by MICHAEL NALLY

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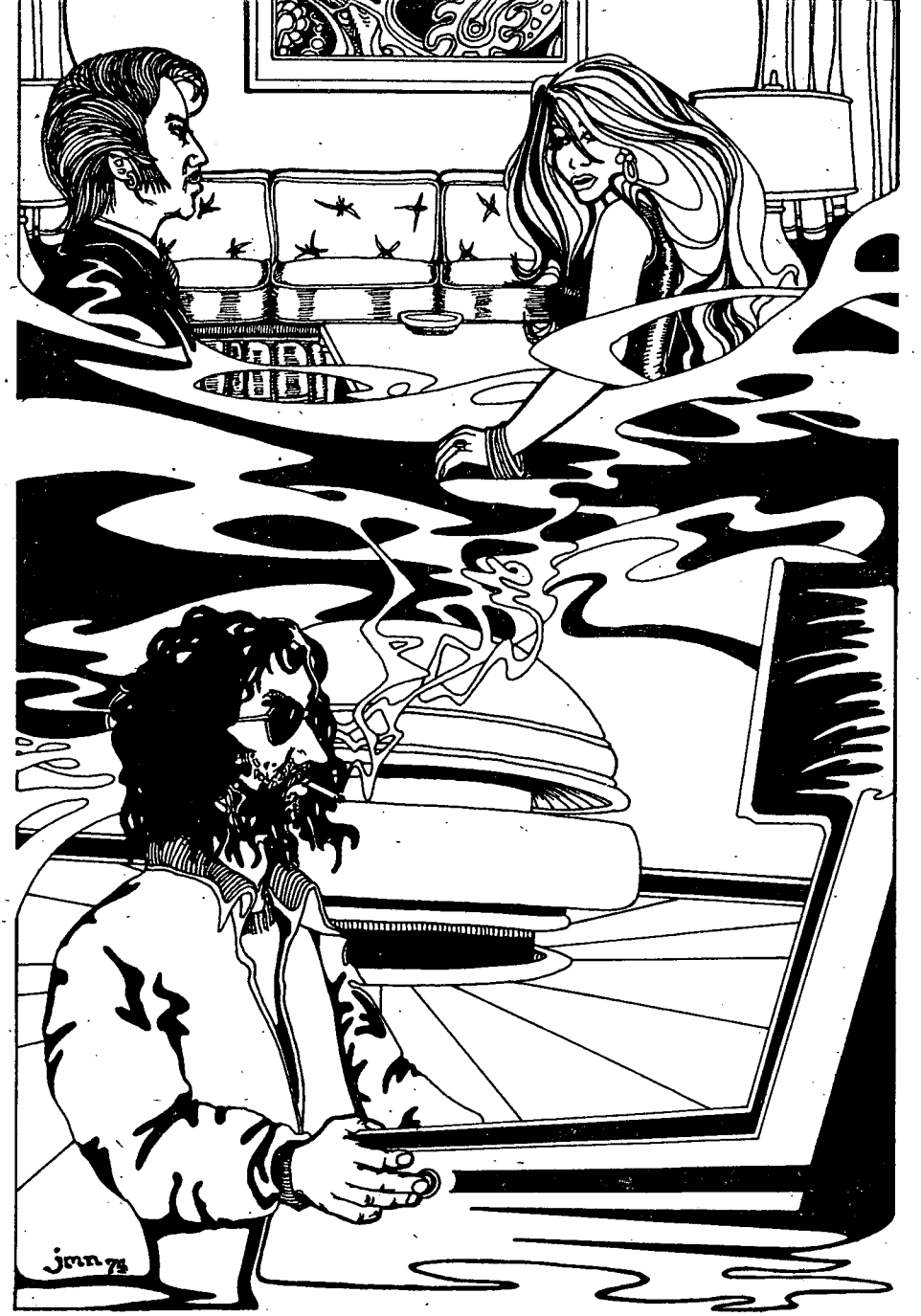

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return. The center button closes the flippers, the two on the sides release the Volcano and the Tar Pit, respectively, also opening the flippers. As many as three balls may be scoring at once. This, combined with the hard-hitting Bally flippers, makes for a fine, highly-recommended .machine.) (Unpaid advt.)

He wore the unofficial uniform of street freaks everywhere—faded jeans and jean jacket, black tee-shirt and desert boots. His hair was medium length, with the texture of frightened dental floss. Nothing extraordinary—anonymous, in fact. A hundred people could have looked like him without really looking like him at all.

This first impression held until I was all the way around, and standing beside him. Seen in profile, his face was hawklike in aspect—his long, curving beak of a nose sharp, his nearly transparent skin stretched over a framework of painfully angular facial bones. Between balls, he looked up shortly—a quick, affirmative nod that acknowledged my presence but just barely. His eyes, behind flashing wire rims, looked like something out of a morgue—two black, bottomless holes with no color at all to them, pupils dilated out past the iris, like shiny black dimes.

He stood with one foot cocked slightly in front of the other, long, nervous white fingers resting lightly on the flipper buttons. He played one game through, easy, like he was only half-trying. And when the GAME OVER again lit up, he didn't make a sound or move a muscle—just stood there tensed. . .waiting.

As if on cue, Lizard (the local mouth) struted over with a crowd of his followers in tow. Hooking his thumbs in a nonexistent gunbelt, he bellowed, "Well looky here fellas. . .this kid done went an' stole our machine!" He snickered into his fist, saying, "Ya reckon he's one a' them there *pin*ball hustlers?" Snickers of approval around the semi-circle. Liz was being appreciated. He said sneeringly, "You been gettin' anything outta that machine?"

The Kid (I had already begun to think of him that way, in capital letters) stood carved out of denim-colored stone, silent as a tomb.

Liz narrowed his eyes and said, "I ast you a question, kid. . ." his voice hard and somehow brittle, like broken glass. "Now, you gonna answer, or what?"

The Kid swiveled easily to face him, balancing on the balls of his feet, like a ballet dancer. His eyes were two bed springs, ready to pop out of his pasty-white face. He stood silent for a few moments, letting the silence grow and gather itself to him. He met Lizard's eyes straight on with a hard, threatening stare, holding the gaze until Liz looked away, losing the contest. The Kid snarled and spit, "Or *what*?"

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throwing it back at him with the crackling edge of hysterical forces barely in control, his eyes bright with the steely glitter of compressed hatred therein.

Liz said sullenly, "Well, you wanta shoot a game then, hotshot?" His eyes burning, fingers tensely clasping and unclasping in a strange, ugly dance.

For an answer, the Kid whipped off his denim jacket, throwing it to hang on the plunger of a nearby machine, from a distance of some few feet. But his actions were all calculated to a hairsbreadth, no less this one. As he turned back to Liz, he was smiling gently about something none of the rest of us were in on, looking like some crippled saint, or an underfed messiah. He said quietly, "Yeah. Y'know, I think I'd like that." The hate suddenly gone, replaced by something like pity.

Liz obviously sensed the change and tried to sniff it out, his animal instincts wary of a trap. With narrowed eyes, he searched the Kid's face for a sign. But, except for the tiny smile curving the Kid's lips, the face and eyes were carefully expressionless. So he said slyly, "Dollar a game alright with you?"

The Kid hesitated for a moment, looking troubled, then said, "Nah, I guess not." Pause, while Lizard regained a bit of his old composure, then, "I'd hate ta take yer money. . ." throwing the line away.

His voice was gentle, and he was smiling beatifically, but his words hit Liz like a slap in the face. He turned three shades of red, and two of purple, before bellowing angrily, "Okay goddamnit. . .*okay*! I'll shoot'cha for a dollar a ball, then!"

The Kid shrugged wordlessly, staring over top of Lizard's head at some immensely fascinating nothing that only he could see.

Liz spun a coin down the slot, sneering acidly, "If th' fuckin' Kozmic Kid here don't mind, *I'd* like ta shoot first." Looking down, I saw his name, *that* name, embroidered over his pocket, like a service station name tag. I barely thought about it then, but what could have been more right?

The Kid moved his hand so slightly, it's almost wrong to call it motion at all. More like what you'd have left if you took the 'act' out of action—the aftermath of motion, if you will. [EXAMPLE: Picture a beautiful young widow who, dropping her handkerchief on the lawn, arches her eyebrow at the handsome young bachelor standing nearby. Got that? Okay, the Kid's gesture was the widow's eyebrow.]

Liz sneered, spit in the corner, and started off with the game.

He was still sneering after the fifth ball, with him out in front by a clean twenty thousand. As he stepped down, and the Kid took his place, I wondered how I could ever have put faith in *this* one to beat Liz (who, for all of his obnox-

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ious bullshit, was still the best pin player around the Strip).

He played it like a champ, I've gotta give him that. . .clumsy, like he was unfamiliar with the game. He swung his flippers loosely, flappingly—almost losing it several times, but always managing to thresh it up and out of harm's way. This went on until he was ahead by a measley, pee-dinkin' li'l thousand, when he dropped it, swinging his flippers a scant second too late. He even cursed softly under his breath, loud enough to hear, but low enough to make you think you weren't supposed to.

Liz was hooked, sucked in by that last little bit of showmanship, a gay-ribboned banderilla in the meaty hunk of his ego. He hissed dangerously, from between clenched teeth, "Okay cock-sucker, I'll shoot'cha fer fifty fuckin' dollars an' we'll settle this thing!"

The Kid shrugged, spinning a coin down the slot, punching up two players with the smooth motions of experience showing thru the facade. I was watching his face closely when he punched them up—as the reels went thicka-thicka, spinning to nines all the way across, dropping down to zeros with a final, resounding *thinck*.

In that moment, that instant of silence between tick and tock, I saw reflected in his thoroughly mad eyes an unknown buddha I would see on this and one other occasion.

The Kid shot first. . .only, instead of pulling the throttle back weakly as before, he slammed it hard with the heel of his hand. All eyes were locked to the table as, not the ball, but a shining streak of silver raced up and around the ramp, an inch or more off the board. It caromed drunkenly off a wall, and played hell among the bumpers for a long, clanging-blinking time, then rolled down to the Kid's expectant flippers. With the wristflip of long practice, he shot it straight into the Tar Pit. The ball he got in return he trapped in the Volcano. Now—loaded, and ready for a run.

He pulled the plunger back carefully, testing tension, measuring distance—the softly-released ball sighed itself out as easily as a breath coming or going. The one bell dinged loudly in the silence, as the ball rolled in oh-so-slowly onto a bank, up just far enough to caress the close flippers, off softly with a reverse spin, landing on his left flipper. He held it steady, perfectly poised for what seemed an eternity. In that time, I could see his face, reflected upside-down and bulbously distorted on the mirrored surface of the silver ball.

Then, the Kid slung the ball off its perch with a sidewise flipper stroke that carried straightaway to the Erupt Volcano button. This second ball hung a turn off his right flipper into the forest of

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thumper-bumpers at the top of the board. The original ball tripped the Release Tar Pit button and then and there the machine beserked itself in a manic shower of sound and light—bumpers sparking, gong ringing, till I thought it would go up in smoke and flames as the Kid poured it on. He never missed a shot, never lost his timing, even with three balls up at once.

Meanwhile, Lizard's jaw drops lower and lower showing rows of uneven yellow teeth.

But still the Kid played—his face tense and contorted, as his fingers went white with pressure from gripping the sides of the cabinet. When the reels turned over, Liz threw down a stack of bills and shuffled out scowling, head down, hands jammed in pockets. No one even looked up.

Still he played—seeming unaware of any thing but the blinken-lights with the finger controls. When he finally stepped down, his score the second time around beat Lizard's by two digits. He blinked, nodded solemnly to out of sight, off-stage directions, and stepped down.

II.

I FOLLOWED THE KID out into the crisp-cool morning night, lighting a cigarette as I went. I stood beside him for a few minutes, gazing off into the blacker than black sky canvas, daubed with countless billions of tiny white light specks. Finally, I cleared my throat and said, "Do you need a ride somewhere?"

He shrugged wordlessly. But when I clumped over to the Rambler, he climbed in on the passenger side.

Riding back on wind-swept country roads, with the sometimes-almost-working heater sputtering in protest, he rolled up all the windows and smoked joint after joint, in quick, nervous pulls.

After we'd loosened our heads considerably, we talked. Or rather. *he* talked. . .waving his arms like a flagman, pounding the seat for emphasis, as anecdotes, observations, and liquid, flowing raps tumbled off his nimble tongue—clickety-clack, nonstop.

From a forgotten lead-in, he extrapolated, "Everything's got a time lag, sure. Hell, our nervous systems have a built-in 1/30th of a second lag. Dig that—even the hippest, most with-it, enlightened dude is still dealing with a movie of what happened 1/30th of a sec ago. That might not sound like a whole helluva lot, but it's relative, like everything else. There's not much happenin' on the routine reality level that you can't catch up with in that time. Most people never even think about that sorta thing. But there's stuff happening in your cells this very second, that your mind couldn't keep up with, sort out, and interpret in a million years. Crucial, life-or-

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death processes that are over and done with before you can blink. Even with a ceiling of the speed of light, 186,000 miles a second is traveling. . .especially in distances as short as between one molecule and the next."

He stopped suddenly, and with a grin that I could swear was sheepish, said, "But why th' hell am I telling you all this bullshit?" Pointing at me with the burning tip of a fresh joint, he said, "Yer hip. You *know* what's happening. You\jus' try not to let on."

I stared in open amazement, trying to figure out just what the hell he was on about now, till the sound of gravel shooting up under my fender brought my attention back to the road. Pulling jerkily back up on the pavement, I cranked the wheel and swerved to miss a pickup.

He laughed shortly, saying, "Ahh man, don't be so surprised. It was bound ta happen —somebody findin' you out, I mean." Taking another toke off what was by now a darkly stained roach, he said, "That bullshit character yer wearin' around might be good enough to fool those clods we just left, but not the Kozmic Kid, nossir." We made the rest of the drive to my apartment in silence—his high and spacey, mine dark brown and worry-stained, clenched with nervous fear. I must sort all this out, thought I. I'd like to find out what his crazy rap means, if at all possible, without making a hopeless ass of myself. I'm intensely conscious of my every action being under the scrutiny of a mind of unknowable vision and scope. I feel like a naked paramecium under a microscope, squirming and wriggling, trying to hide. Paranoid visions of elaborate deceptions elbow their way to center stage. I feel like an actor on opening night, who's just blown his most crucial scene in the whole play. Lost my script and fumbling, trying to remember what my next line is, or should be. I could see the cue cards if the stage wasn't so goddamned dark. Pitch dark. I can't even see the backdrop. What kinda production is this anyway? One of those baroque tragi-comic farces? Work this out, before it gets too deep.

But the dark angel beside me is giving no clues, adrift in the deep space behind his eyelids. Guess I'll have to ask. Ahem. "What kinda dope did you say this was, anyway?"

He opened his eyes and grinned at me. "It's a mutant strain. Hybrid offshoot of twelve different weeds." He intoned gaily, "Two tokes to Nirvana, four for Inferno, and six hits to suicide." He laughed, shuddering slightly as a small energy bolt caught him between the shoulder blades. "Why? Don't you like it?"

"Oh no, it's not that. I'm just wondering if I'll come down. . ."

He grinned infectiously, saying, "Well, let's hope not, anyway." He paused, then added irrevel-

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antly, "It's a long way to Tipperary."

Somehow back to my apartment, to stand around, shake our heads and giggle. Click-clank double lock the door, and sit cross-legged on the floor, to talk, listen to records and get stoned. . .er.

Somewhere amid, and among all this, I got talked into driving the Kid into New Orleans, to play the pin machines there. After all, I rationalized, it's only a coupla hundred miles, and I've been restless anyway. There was nothing of value in the apartment that I couldn't pack up, and take with me. I've always been a light traveler, periodically splitting to a new town, living there only until the urge came over me again. This apartment was almost identical to a score of other transient rooms occupied by myself in the last few months. In the light of this conversation, I can see many of the recent happenings as signposts that it was time to move on. The awful, dragging boredom, the long, dreary days, and the even longer, endless nights had set themselves up in an old, familiar pattern. Besides, with the Kid talking, it was impossible to disagree, to break the flow, even if I *had* the energy.

But even as I worked all this out, I saw the Kid's mouth working, forming (presumably) words. I plugged in the sound, turning up the volume to hear, "Well, let's get it on. . ."

It took a bit for me to realize he was talking about *now*. Dragging the words out of my sluggish and reeferstoned brain, I said, "Fer chrissakes man, it's. . ." And hesitated, as I fumbled my watch around on my wrist, tried to focus, gave up, and finally did it, seeing *5:30* on the digital dial. "Wha-at?" I babbled idiotically, in a hopeless imitation of rational speech.

He said quickly, as if just remembering, "Oh, I got us somethin to get there on. . ." handing me a featureless brass vial with a spoon on a tiny chain. I unscrewed the lid, and studied the contents curiosly—it contained a measure of grainy white powder rippled and trailed with smallish chunks and deposits of blue powder that seemed to burn cold, a blue-white star crushed fine. I tasted a couple of grains on the tip of my tongue—they tasted like busy little electric sparks. Like ozone.

The Kid said proudly, "It's my special mixture. . .pure clinical meth, laced with blue Owsley acid."

God.

"It'll keep ya goin'," he assured me. I piddled in it a minute, then dug in with the tiny spoon, *phhht—phhht* inhaling one measure up each nostril. After a frozen moment, my whole upper forebrain smoked, glowed and burst into flames—liquid lava fires that rose moltenly, submerging my conscious mind beneath a spattering gout of red. Deaf and blind to

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the world, I hurtled into the swirling patterns of electrical fire that danced and fragmented into a billion identical swirls. I crashed with rag doll fluttering helplessness, dashed and battered, torn into shreds by the flood tide of the timeless play of elemental energy.

The Final Reality began to dawn. . . . . the tiny dying *I* that was me saw the Answer, as he looked into the maw of the churning atomic-elemental furnace that is the timeless, beyond-time birthing-place of the universe. . . . . and trembling, freaked openly. I. . . I. . .

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A timeless later, when my vision cleared (more or less) I found I could move once more. I picked my head up from my chest, where it had fallen, blinked, reprogramming for the new environment. I could make out (though dimly at first) the outline, then the figure, of the Kid's face —looking as if it were composed of the same swirling red crystals as had engulfed me only instants/centuries ago. Question: Have I, or have I not gone crazy? I can almost believe that my new vision allows me to look directly *into* the structure of things, cells and etc.—but then, I *have* taken a drug which causes hallucinations. *Thought*: Well, if that's all they are, why don't they go away? *Thought*: It's upset some delicate chemical balance in my brain, and changed me. But for better, or worse, I wonder? Can it change me back?

Whiting out so suddenly my brain reels under the impact, I hear the Kid's voice draining in from somewhere, saying, ". . .an' we'll cover the whole fuggin' country, playin' pinball as we go. Make enough money ta live on, an' just stay high and have a good time. We kin always catch odd jobs if the goin' gets rough—" Pause for a breath "Which it won't." Nuther breath, then off and running again, a mile a minute mouth runs case.

I find myself nodding and agreeing, and realize with a start, that I have been doing so for some time. While I was away, a part of my mind beyond my knowledge and certainly beyond my control has been carrying glibly on without me—using the pre-recorded stock phrases in the front of my mind.

So it is that, a series of faster-than-light scene-shifts later, I'm back down at the car, carrying a duffel bag that was found to contain the following:

One pair of jeans (faded, Capt. America patch on ass)

Three Thorazaine capsules

Eight peyote buttons in cel-

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lophane

A twisted harmonica with three dead reads

&

An IMPEACH EARL BUTTON button

III.

THE KID AGREED to drive, myself recalling bad experiences involving driving while acid-stoned. He did fine until the Interstate, where he kept complaining about 'magnets in the road,' and weaving over the center line. I took over, and drove from then on —eerie blue luminescence suffusing a Flash Gordon control panel. . .meteor-moths disintegrating with a crackle, against our humming windshield-force field.

As the miles of blacktop —punctuated by countless dotted white flashes—flew by, joint after perfect, cylindrical joint rolled from the Kid's nimble, assembly-line fingers.

The smoke seemed to wire him up even more, and he spun off into another three-hour rap, beginning precisely where he had left off before—as if it were a particularly well-greased track, that his mind slid easily onto.

Saying, "There is a way outta the situation, though. . ."

I was on the point of asking just what situation he had reference to, when he answered my thoughts impatiently, "The 1/30th of a second situation, what else? The time lag built into your sensory setup."

"Oh," I said stupidly. "Well, what *is* the way out?"

"It's *this*!" he shouted suddenly, snapping his fingers in my face, not an inch from my eyes.

I slapped the hand away, saying, "Goddamn man, don't *do* that! I'll run off the road!"

Shaking his head and frowning, he said, "You didn't get it?" Then, shrugging, he said to himself, "Oh well, it was a cheap Zen mind-trick anyway. . ." Then, registering my annoyed aspect, he explained, "It's a survival mechanism. . .instinctive reflexes. . .adrenalin."

I said coldly, "I still don't get what yer talkin' about." Still pissed off, but trying to understand.

"Okay man, take it easy." He paused, then said "There. That's much better. Okay, think about your brain for a minute. A computer, with about 3 billion individual brain cells. An' any one a them can be in touch with as many as 25,000 others at any given time. Got that? Well, the number a' interconnection that that adds up to, is a couple er three more than the number of atoms in the universe." He paused, nodding, to let that one sink in. "An' into this superpowered logic machine, floods about a hundred million bits of sensory information every second. Too much, right? We couldn't possibly cope with that. So far and above most of that sensory information is

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imprinted on conditioned symbol-cues. You know, like you see a red light, and you think STOP*WAIT*DANGER and yer foot goes to the brake—conditioned reflex. I'm not sayin' that it's entirely bad. . .a certain amount of conditioning is necessary for survival, the more so, when you live in as highly complex, machine-oriented society as we do.

"But the uglies come in between conditioning for the good of all, and for the good of the few in power—when that thin line is blurred, and finally erased, that society becomes a dictatorship, intent on nothing except the maintenance of the position of power, by those who have it. To this end, they have invested a great deal of energy to enforcing the bullshit monopoly reality set that they have set up. A well-organized conspiracy, in which our captors moved in at childbirth, using our parents (themselves blind, frightened mind-slaves), teachers (paid employees of the system), and sundry other agents of the Consciousness Contraction Combine, to systematically censor, monopolize and manipulate just which of the thousands of sensory stimuli we receive every second, that we would consider meaningful or worthwhile.

"We all are doomed from birth, to a life of sleep-walking around on a TV commercial reality-set, never fully awake—never fully aware. Using grim Pavlovian conditioning of punishment and reward, the masters lead us around by our ontological noses, forced to play the game roles assigned us, stumbling to the conclusion of a long dreary life, with nothing to show for it but a mass of wrinkles, and a gold pocket watch.

"And the young, the seed bearers—held in check by the most brutal, totalitarian measures available. Pushed down, harassed, busted—forbidden, upon pain of imprisonment, to lift the reality curtain, and gaze on the naked beyond. Why? Cause, when someone goes from *here*, and reaching out, makes it over *there*, the big Ah-Hah, he comes back enlightened. Given insight into not only himself, but into the order of universal things, leads to the unmasking of the sordid social games that are run on him every day. . . To drop out thereof, contributing, from that point on, absolutely nothing that would be considered lasting, or of worth, to any right-thinking, beer-drinking, brainwashed American. (Or any other 'an', for that matter.) If everybody just checked out of society, turnin' their back on it, and doin' the other thing, the whole mess would collapse. An empire cannot exist without subjects, and you betcher ass *they* know it, too."

He paused, apparently for breath. I injected quickly, "But I still don't understand about the shout, and the gestures. . .and what about what you said about

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Zen?"

Pausing to thoughtfully suck the life out of whatever-joint-it-was-we-were-on-by-now, he said, "Yeah, Zen's pretty neat. The basic crux of Zen is that the pure, unconditioned mind, free-flowing as water, is as much perfection as we stand a chance of attaining, and holding. The only problem now, as it was then, is to be constantly reminded of your basic buddha nature. That free flow is in full flower only in young children, and it fades far too quickly, as conditioning sets in.

"Once caught in the tangling trap of all-day, every-day reality, the way back to perfect flow is open only in intermittent flashes obtained through sex, or stimulants such as psychedelic chemicals, or by shocking your nervous system out of its slumber with a good shot of adrenalin, which boils down to the same thing. This last is what I did to you. Survivors of accidents almost always report a sense of time being slowed down just prior to the accident—the same sort of time-dialation effect described as an effect of LSD. That's it.

"The other way out, this being the primary concern of Zen, is through exercises directed toward seeing through the illusion of Self, awakening to all the realms existent outside the bag of skin that we confine all our reactions to, and insist on calling 'I'. These take the form of word games, paradoxes, and question and answer sessions known as *koans*. Literally translated, the word means 'hidden', or 'obscure'. The Zen teacher knows that to help the student is, in the long run, to hinder him, so he goes out of his way to confuse and mislead the student. Even the rankest beginner knows that the buddha does not lie somewhere outside—he is never told to seek it on a nearby mountaintop or across the ocean. Contrariwise, he is told to seek it within himself. He will be told to seek it within himself with all of his energy, never giving up the quest, whether eating, sleeping, or whatever. He is, in fact encouraged to make a total fool of himself, chasing round and round like a dog chasing its own tail. A typical beginning koan is to ask the student to discover his 'original face', that is, his aspect, before being conceived by his mother and father. He soon discovers that his master has no patience with wordy philosophical answers, or the like—for the master wants proof that he has experienced the meaning of the koan by a specific and usually nonverbal demonstration which he is expected to arrive at intuitively.

"At this point, he may bring his teacher bits of rock, fallen leaves, or other randomly-selected bits of concrete reality, all to no avail.

"This goes on until he reaches a point where he is so trapped in cross-turns and dead ends of logic that he feels completely stupid, at

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wits end. The world seems to be a mass of pure doubt. *If not myself, can I be sure of anything in the world?* he may wonder. *How can anything be sure?* At which time, he is of course beginning to get on the right track. He knows nothing, he realizes. The student wanders around in a highly-conscious daze, *seeing* everything, but comprehending nothing.

At this point, his teacher might spring the ancient Confucian poem-question: What is the sound of one hand clapping? Why, no-sound, of course. *What is the true nature of your self* becomes just as transparently absurd since, in the final event, the only true self is no-self. In a blinding flash called satori, the student preceives in an instant that all things, all impulses, and all relationships in the universe are One. The illusion of 'the mind seeking the mind' is dispelled, shown for the illusion it always was. The hard knot of his self-hood is loosened, and left for him to undo. And he laughs. . .great whooping rounds of cosmic laughter that dwarf him, swallowing him up, and give the master the final proof that he was looking for all along.

"He sees that all matter is temporary—as a self-limiting state of energy in constant change—as real as the apparently solid circle made by the whirling blades of a fan. In truth, all things are nothing more than clumps of atoms, spinning and vibrating tracklessly at the speed of light, which, as a matter of convenience, we insist on seeing as solid. This is true since most human perception is limited, in that people seldom look at things to *see* them, they just sort of look where the thing is centered, or supposed to be, to make sure there is something there. Any other processes that one might chance to catch, on occasion, are classified as hallucinations, which are by definition bad, crazy, the province of psychotics and schizophrenics. The unwilling, involuntary mystics that languish in cold grey Kafkaesque institutions were simply not prepared by society to accept the timeless message of the cosmos (*You are god: Remember.*), and having it forced on them by time, or circumstances led them to behave in ways that are classified as irrational, or abberational, so they are locked up by society for their own, and others' 'protection'.

"The world as we know it, is only a fractional part of the chain of fleeting processes that are. For instance, you may look at a tree once, or a hundred times, and it still *looks* the same. But the atoms of the tree's existence, the very 'treeness' of the tree is in a state of constant change, never the same twice. Some of the changes are viable, and become permanent, but most keep on changing again and again, until death. Then comes a flurry of motion, as decomposition sets in, then the final stillness—death." He paused for a long infinity-

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gaze, then went on. "The most important thing is rhythm. The dance of life—Creation, Evolution, Destruction. Ya gotta keep in step with the 3 billion year old drum roll. Fish know it. . .when they spot another fish thrashing around wildly without purpose, they know that that one is surely marked for death.

"All untimely motions, ego-trips, or otherwise swimming upstream against the flow, are signals that the organism has been out of touch too long. The balance will be restored, if it takes the destruction of whatever-it-is, to bring things back into harmony. Anybody, or anything that flies too high for too long, is bound to fall."

Sitting hunkered over the wheel like a dead man, I roused at that. "Amen to that, brother! Like the way you creamed ole Lizard last night. . .boy, the heavy hand of karma caught up with that sonofabitch but good. He's terrorized Pancho's ever since I been goin' there. Now, he won't be able to show his face in there again. *Ha*!" I laughed aloud, remembering the dumb look of shock on his ugly pan.

Silence. The Kid says nothing, and says it so loud that I shudder. Passing a wasted thin hand in front of his eyes and frowning as if in pain, he says, "I had no fuckin' right ta do that. . .none a-tall. Like, I really hurt that dude, y'know what I mean?" Not really asking for my confirmation, for he seemed to have forgotten I was in the car—just mumbling weakly to himself, shaking his head.

I frowned. I couldn't think of much else to do. I started in to say, "But you beat him fair an' he deserved it anyway. . .", and had gotten as far as 'But. . .', when he cut me off with "No, man *really*. . .", with a sweeping gesture that caused the joint in his hand to twinkle and glow, dropping an inch of ashes on the seat— "Really, I don't go for the competition so much, y'know what I mean? Like, to me, the pinball machine is a scaled-down miniature of the whole universe—the cosmos under glass. It's a whole mythic, cellular reincarnational thing—traps and rewards, payoffs and pitfalls, the whole thing. And onto this thumper-bumper cosmology, the silver ball is cast out unaware. . .that's *us*, man, that's all of us!" He hunched his shoulders excitedly, and went on, "An' from that point on, it's karma all the way—cause and effect. Every action, every motion, every thought must be tuned into the humming high rhythm of the machine. But you can only go so far—makin' plays, winning scores—all of it beating off the inevitable. Gravity is pullin' against ya all the time, so, no matter who you are, what you are, how good you are, in the end, we all wind up in the same place—the hole. . .out. . .the void. . .dead."

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He laughed crazily, a screeching hysterical howl that shivered raggedly up the scale, spiraling upward out of normal range. It made my fillings hurt, and I could hear it, long after it should have been gone.

But then he giggled, punching me affectionately in the shoulder, "But why th' hell am I tellin' *you* all this bullshit? I keep forgetting, you *know*." He looked at me expectantly, as if waiting for comment.

A pause, and he went on again, answering my thoughts directly, rather than my words (of which there were none): "Don't even try ta tell me you don't know what I'm talkin' about. . .shee-it man, I *saw* thru yer game the first time I looked at you." He looked at me oddly, a sly, sidewise, lizard-eyed glance, then said, "O'course if you wanta go on playin' yer game, it's not my place ta judge. Jus' tell me one thing man. . ." he said, leaning way over to look me in the eyes, "Are you just bidin' your time, waitin' fer a chance'ta lay into 'em, is that it?" He sat back stiffly, as if struck by a sudden thought, saying, "Nah, I guess yer beyond all that. Buddhas don't hafta think about revenge, do they?" And he lapsed into an indistinct mumble.

Staring at his huge eyes glowing madly in the moonlight, I was quite honestly afraid. Not that I thought he'd pull out an ax and murder me, or something crass like that; I just didn't have any idea what to expect, or what he was capable of. The goofy baboon, Insanity, had climbed into the car with me, and I wondered precisely what was expected of me—I honestly didn't understand any of what he was on about and, if it seemed that I did, it wasn't a conscious attempt to put on airs, to pretend to be something I wasn't.

I had only gotten this far in my thoughts, when he erupted with, "Ahhh don't hand me that crap man. . .whattaya think I am, one a' *them*?" Jerking his thumb out the window, apparently indicating the unspecified *'them'*. He looked at me disgustedly, then repeated, with weary finality, "Don't hand me that crap, man." Then, "I'm goin' to sleep."

And he did lean his head on the window and, to all appearances, seem to sleep. But it could have been a mind-game of some kind, to punish me for my (to him, deliberate) refusal to understand what he was saying. Or, it could be a ruse of some kind, to lull me into unawareness, catch me off guard, or maybe. . .

And so on, through the night, as mile after mile of gray ribbon unrolled beneath my wheels. I was too exhausted to do anything but let the car drag my unresisting carcass toward a nebulous destination. The radio had long since given up the ghost, (although it still hummed and glowed inportantly if you turned it on) which made for little diversion but mind-traps and mazes,

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contests on which depended, first my life, then the world (which were the same, to begin with), until finally. . .

And so on.

IV.

THE KID CAME AWAKE a few hours later, with the sun up, and the signs talking about New Orleans. He sat up, rubbing blue knuckles into his eyes, squinting off into the haze. ". . .See it now," he said, to no one in particular.

"Whassat?" I said, pretending he had addressed me.

A garbled, sleep-drenched babble ensued, from which I could only make out about every third word: ". . .wind sock. . . airport. . .home." He pointed toward the horizon, indicating a tiny orange dot that seemed to move and change, in an invisible breeze.

After waking fully, he entertained me with tales of pinball shenanigans there in the airport—hustling soldiers and sleeping in the baggage room, living in the place for weeks at a time. It all sounded just incredible enough to be true.

By now, we were zipping thru crosstown traffic (did you miss the transition? So did I.), looking up at the buildings, pointing at the signs that said STOP WAIT CAUTION and laughing at the worry-scurry-hurrying Ant City mobs, all with a definite, life or death somewhere they had to be right *now*.

After a bit of stoned maneuvering, we pulled up in front of the airport. He directed me around back to a parking place for ten cars that only him and nine other people in the world knew about.

Bzazz into the building—glass and aluminum all around, heels going clickety-clickety on shiny checkerboard tile that seemed to go on forever. "Are you sure we're supposed to be in here?" I said, darting glances about out of mud-red eyes, fearing uniformed intervention at any moment.

"Awwwwshit man, this is my home!" the Kid said with a giggle, and a Temptations two-step.

And he seemed to know, so I followed. . .up a hallway, thru a cross-cut, down a corridor, and into a little alcove set off to itself. Here at least, in this dingy little corner of iniquity, I felt safe. The floor held the mark of a thousand stomped-out cigarettes, and pinball machines were ranged along the whole of two walls.

The Kid said, "This is one of the officially-established haunts of the rare *carnivorous flipperus*. Every year in cycles, the beasts flock to these haunts—like lemmings to the sea—to experience ego-death, dissolution, and sensations of oneness with the universe, via Ballys, and Williams, not to mention Chicago Coin's finest line of Karmic Cycle Inducers, known to you earthlings as

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'pinball machines'." He went on and on, laughing, turning himself on, with the air of a demented tour guide in a madman's museum. "O'course, it ain't what it use'ta be. . ." he went on. "Use to, you'd hafta fight almost, ta get anywhere near the spot where yer standin'."

At present however, it was unoccupied, except for a small black dog pissing assiduously in the corner, and a very thin man in a black undertaker's suit. At the Kid's greeting, he (the man) spun around, coattails a-flying, but seemed more pleased than surprised to see my companion.

The Kid turned to me and said, by way of introduction, "This here is none other than the infamous 'Lanta Sam, dealer and purveyor of every mind- and body-stone imaginable, and some that ain't. We met four—or was it five?—years ago in a li'l grease bar on 14th in Atlanta. We played the old King Kool in that place till 2 in th' mornin'—we wuz gettin' replays on every ball, till the manager fin'ly threw us out. Man still owes us two games, in fact."

While doing head-bobs to all this, I looked this new dude over. . .much of muchness, in a word. He looked like a cross between a greasey gunfighter, and the Prince of Darkness—he wore a black string tie held in place by a clip the shape of a miniature pistol, hand tooled Mexican cowboy boots, and a black silk gangster shirt with long pointed collars hanging halfway down his chest. His face was all hard planes and angles, with a mad-monk pointed goatee, heavy, overhanging eyebrows over deep-sunken, nearly invisible eyes, topped off by a shiny oiled pompadour.

"Goddamnit Kid. . ." Sam began almost fiercely, ignoring the Kid's good-natured bullshit, "We wuz fixin' ta send out a search party fer yer young ass! Here it is October, an' I ain't seen, nor heard a word from you in six months, an' you come prancin' in just as pretty as you please." He paused, his brows drawn darkly, eyes glowing like embers in deep-sunken charcoal pits. "Where the fuck you been, man? What caused you to run off and hide like you did? There's people here that care about you man—we been worried, you know that?" He stopped making words, looking straight on at the Kid, a cloud of Concern darkening his face.

The Kid shrugged uneasily, scuffing the surface of one worn brown desert boot with the back of the other. Licking his lips and jiggling his leg nervously, he said, "Sorry man, I. . ." Pause, while muscles clench, tighten. "I been fucked up. . .other scenes, an'. . .y'know. . ." he looked up, meeting Sam's eyes with a glance that I could swear was imploring. He cut his eyes over at me, and back, saying, "Please, man. . ."

I felt out of place, an outsider to the scene taking place. Sam

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glanced quickly in my direction and back, nodding, and saying, softly, "Okay man. . .later."

They stood like that for a few frozen moments, until Sam broke up the tense tableau by whooping heartily, "Well, goddamn, it's good to see you, anyway!" But the heartiness seemed bluff, forced. Gesturing widely, he said, "C'mon Kid, I'll shoot'cha a game on the Gunsmoke—warm up."

The Kid nodded solemnly, saying, "Just a minnit. . ." He turned to the first machine, bowing stiffly from the waist. He said politely, "If you'll excuse ma'am, I've been invited ta dance with one a' yer friends. I shall attend your needs at the earliest opportunity." In an aside to me, he said out of the corner of his mouth, "Ya gotta talk nice to 'em, and be polite, er they'll shit ya forever—just like a woman."

He sprang up with sudden life, dipping a hand into the pocket of his jeans—but Sam already had it going, and was bouncing, rolling and charging the first ball around the board, while the machine clanged, buzzed, and cooed with ecstasy.

(The Gunsmoke is an interesting machine, for a number of reasons. It's an old machine, one of Chicago Coin's first line, but in many ways, it is as advanced a machine as any on the market. It was one of the first to feature special scoring holes, of which it boasts no less than three. The first of these, the Bonus hole located in the lower center of the board, directly below the bumpers, is a typical advancing-score setup that does up to 500, but shrinks back to nothingness with the end of play. The other two Gunsmoke devices are another story entirely though. Located to the lower left, and top center of the playing field, they are activated when the ball is caught inside. They are hooked up to a scoring device that flashes scores of 50 to 500, over and over until a designated button on the front of the cabinet is pushed, scoring whatever is up, and releasing the ball for further play. The other striking feature is the number of holes through which the ball can exit. In addition to the two standard side lanes, there are spaces on either side of the flippers which are wide enough to allow a badly-played ball to escape with ease. This is, in turn balanced by the Ball Saver, a padded post located directly below, and between the flippers. Using it is an art that takes practice, but this feature, with a little creative gunching, has saved many a surely-lost ball.)

After a bit, I suggested taking a break for some eats. The last thing I had eaten was a Twinky at Pancho's, and I was about to starve. We made it over to the airport lounge for cheeseburgers and beer, the Kid refusing to drink, having a coke instead. After we had finished, and sat for a few minutes, drinking in the warm glow of food contentment,

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Sam picked up all three of the checks, and started off toward the cashier. I said, "Hey, you don't hafta do that man, I got money," holding up a couple of bills. His eyes snapped, and spit fire in my direction, and he stalked off, still holding the checks in his hand.

My eyes were two question marks, as I turned to the Kid for some kind of explanation. He shrugged and said simply, "He likes to spend money." I must have looked bewildered, for he said, "He thought you didn't like him, when you wooten let him buy yer dinner. You'll just hafta get used to it."

Sam returned to view a few minutes later, with an armload of presents from the rinky-dink airport souvenir shop. For me, a floor-length, white silk scarf. For the Kid, a little green Alpine hat, with a hellow feather stuck in the band.

The bumness of before seemed to be forgotten, at least for the time being. But on a subtle, between-the-lines level, I could still detect an unresolved vibe hanging in the air between.

Meanwhile, Sam swiveled on his bar stool with a squeak, and addressing equally the Kid and myself, said, "Nuthin' much is gonna be happenin' around here for another coupla hours. Ya'll gotta car?"

"Yeah, we're parked around back."

He said, "Well, you wanna make it out ta yer car an' smoke some dope, till the suckers get in?"

This being agreeable to all, we rose up and shuffled out, Sam in the lead, me next, and the Kid bringing up the rear. I wouldn't say we were a strange-looking lot, but we *did* attract some stares on the way out—the Kid in that silly-ass little mountain-climber hat, me with my WWII fighter pilot scarf, and Sam with. . .just everything.

As we were passing the ticket booth, a tiny Negro porter stopped to watch us pass, colliding head on with an elderly matron in fake-furs and dime-store jewelry. She went "Ooop!" and dropped her pince-nez glasses between a pair of the most voluminous mammaries I have ever laid eyes (or anything, else, for that matter) on.

Sam sighed noisily, licking his lips as he said, "*Lord* wouldn't I give a bundle ta be that li'l ole pair of glasses, a-divin' down between them big old things. My, *my*!"

The lady took on a look of injured dignity, or at least as much of one as anyone can, who is standing in the middle of a crowded airport, rummaging around in the front of her blouse.

Somehow out to the car amid giggles that periodically burst into rounds of groaning, side-splitting mirth. For, as soon as we all had stopped, one or the other of us would think of the expression on her face, and a whole new new

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round would start all over again.

Inside, the windows rolled up, and Sam produced a huge brass pipe from the folds of his coat, accompanied by a tiny brown vial of sticky, DMT-drenched weed.

Sound: *phhht*-suck, eyes rolled back into the head, and the pipe came my way. I likewise inhaled. . .felt the pressure behind the eyes as I packed it down with air, held it. . .beginnings of a throbbing pulse-rush building, building. . .passed the pipe on as I exhaled slowly, slowly. . .but not near slow enough—*warning*: Fatal unity-fusion imminent—go back, back. . .too late. . .Jeweled shutters opening—lite—brite—toooooo brite. . .as the tiny dying *i* that used to be me is caught in the swirling slipstream of dimethyltrypyt consciousness and obliterated, but totally. Gone. Wasted. Totaled out.

Minutes/hours/daze later, when I'm most of the way back up (down?) to wherever it was I started from—point zero, or a little before—I hold my hands up, flex them once or twice—fingers are fingers again, and it's almost safe to think.

As my head wobbled weakly on a stiff glass neck, the first object that drifted into view was Sam's face, hugely blown and distended, pores big as craters on the moon. He was nodding and smiling, a disembodied head saying, "Fine dope, eh?"

It was indeed quite extraordinary dope, and I was unable to say anything for some time.

In fact, the sun was going down behind marshmallow clouds, before any of us got it together enough to move. Sam commenced digging thru his pockets again (I wouldn't have been in the least surprised to see him pull a girl out of those pockets), producing a small silver bullet, clearly labeled Cocaine. On unscrewing the actual bullet from the cartridge, it revealed itself cleverly as a stash, with a built-in spoon. Sam took one of the tiny spoons up each nostril, pinching the other off, then did a repeat. Snuffing and snorting noisily, wiping a smudge of white powder of his droopy, Wyatt Earp mustache, he passed the vial over to me. I took one spoonful up each nostril, feeling. . . . . .regretting my rank foolishness in free fall, where it mattered not at all. But was relieved to find myself back in a fraction of a flash, before I had time to even begin to worry. I turned to offer the Kid a taste, but he already had his kit out, and was preparing to hit another dime of his special mixture.

Eventually though, we did get going—shuffle-weaving across the parking lot, the air cold enough to make mist-devils from our breath, as we retraced our steps around the building, hard-edged and sharp, in the healing wall of damp fog that has seeped magically in, suffusing all light into soft patches of glow, mystically reducing Infinity to the dimensions of this park-

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ing lot. Beyond that, nothingness—the Void. That for later, though. Now, we had a *mission.*

A clickety-clickety scene shift, and we were back at Ye Olde Pinball Hole, now occupied by several groups of soldiers, and a tiny newspaperboy standing on a crate, engrossed in a single-player in the corner.

Sam peeled off to work a crowd of young, loud blacks huddled around a Jungle machine in the far corner. The Kid paused for a moment of consideration, then buttonholed the most disreputable marine sergeant imaginable. I'm not kidding: he had brownish-green nicotine teeth, a face like a squashed Tijuana treetoad, and a 86-proof bourbon breath that could peel paint at twenty paces. Ugly was a loud, cocky drunk, and the Kid had no trouble persuading him to play a game on the Fireball for ten bucks.

(In the Kid's opinion, the Fireball was the crowning glory of Pinball technology, the ultimate mathematical precision that almost makes you think that you've got a shot at that eternal, quixotic quest that every myth is based around, the Holy Grail of Pinballdom, The Perfect Game. For the Kid, playing a well-tuned Fireball could be compared to the transcendental sort of joy that a music master might find in a favorite Bach composition.)

The first striking thing about the Fireball is the spinning black disc that reigns over the whole lower half of the board.

Sitting astride this whirling black mount is a creature, a half-dreamed demon from a Dantean hellworld. On his left hand is Wotan, god of the west. To his right sits Odin, the eastern god. These are the Fire Gods, supreme in majesty, scrupulous in reward, but unforgiving in justice. The weak, the fumbling, are dealt with quickly. Only the high and the pure are allowed to stay, and then, only as long as the man/machine interchange is pure, untainted by ego or fear.

The tour: The ramp is a device as complex in conception as it is simple in design. Between the first slope of this ramp, and the drop-off, is a metal bar, separating two passages. To the right, a 100 point trip. To the left, 3000. It's a delicate shot—not too hard, or it will overshoot, missing the game entirely. Not too soft, or it will roll up just so far, then fall back down to the bottom, for an ignominious 100. A classic Taoist lesson of the Middle Way. Succeeding in this also lights up the bumpers nearest that exit gate, for a bit of quick karma, before the real action starts.

Wotan and Odin are, respectively, two ball traps (of the 4 Million BC variety) on the left and right sides of the machine, each activated by a yellow button on the opposing side, which also opens the flippers. Blue button in center field closes the flippers. A

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messenger ball in a rolling slot trough releases *both* Fire Gods simultaneously, with a 500 point bonus. Some machines are exercises in baroque, tangled complexity, while others are vapid, over-simple kiddy-pins (like the ones at the beach with the big clunky flippers, that you used to play when you were ten years old).

The Fireball, conversely, is an exercise in tasteful restraint. . .the theme, the contemparary myth, as it were, is underplayed, if anything. Good machine. It's one that will give you a run for your money.

Ugly shot first, and then the Kid did a repeat (minus various insignificant details) of the game he played with Liz, except that he stayed out in front by about a thousand, stringing ugly on that fashion, until the fifth ball, when he simply got behind it and flashed on out of sight.

The 3000 ramp play was flawlessly executed, the ball freewheeling up and around the bar like a well-trained acrobat. Wotan and Odin both primed and ready to go, in another two shots, then he triggered the Release Fire God's messenger ball, and that was it. Tracers of multi-image Newtonian-physics light shows reflected in my eyes as the electronic-fusion dance that the Kid went into which the machine built dizzyingly to an unspeakable climax—the Kid shuddering deeply, from head to foot—then dropped dizzyingly out.

And so on. . .for several hours, until the Kid burnt one guy so badly that he and seven of his buddies stalked out scowling.

At which point, we decided to pack it in.

V.

I FOLLOWED snail-pace slow behind Sam's Caddy (black, naturally) barely keeping it on the road. Meanwhile, the Kid was saying, "I hope you see the implications in tonight's fanfare. . .Pinball Hustling is a fine art that takes much time to master. But the rewards, aside from wholesome competition and good clean fun, are painfully obvious. . ." He riffled a stack of bills between thumb and forefinger, as thick as a dime-store dictionary. He went on, "Anybody can shoot pinball. Millions a' mommie's li'l rugrats do it every day. But ta Hustle takes, in addition to mere skill, a good working knowledge of the subtleties of manipulatory psychology."

Jesus Christ, I thought inanely. *How can anybody toss around ten-dollar words like that, and still sound illiterate?*

He continued, seemingly unaware of (but perhaps merely overlooking) my random irreverent thought, "There are two kindsa people in the world: The hustlers and the hustled. Them that's got it, and walk around beggin' peo-

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ple ta take it away from 'em, and them that oblige 'em. Take me, f'rinstance. I'm actually doin' these people a great favor, taking the karmic burden of alla that money off their heads. And o'course it comes in handy, affordin' the bills of my own lifestyle—but that's part of the game."

He cocked an eyebrow in my direction, to see if he could catch me off guard. Nodding and seeming satisfied, he went on, "And you, my friend, are chosen to be my apprentice. I intend to teach you all the li'l tit-bits (if you'll excuse the pun) that I have picked up on (or laid down with) in my long years of association with the game. This just goes to show what a nice, and basically wonderful person I am." He giggled, eyes glazed over like tarnished tin. "And also, when ole Koz goes to that great big pin machine up there in the sky," here he raised huge, mock-holy eyes heavenward, "there'll be somebody ta carry on in my place."

By this time, we've stopped in front of what must be, *has to* be the house. . . unless I'd stumbled onto the set of some medieval Gothic horror flick. The center wing of the two story monstrosity was squat and low-built, with two structures spreading out on either side that most closely resembled bat's wings. Words fail me to describe the shudder of primal fear I felt, standing in the still slowly drifting clouds of steamy-white fog that scudded silently up a deserted street, reaching out with great formless tentacles, to embrace this building like a brother.

But, once inside, regardless of appearances, I collapsed on the first vaguely horizontal object I encountered, and slept soundly into the middle of the next afternoon.

WHEN I AWOKE, the world was the inside of a pingpong ball—it seemed that, during the night, the Pranksters had decided that I looked like a corpse, stretched out on Sam's coffee table, so they draped me with an appropriate white sheet. Yuk, yuk.

As I was stretching and yawning, fitting tendons into place with a crackle and a pop, Sam's strange, cute, quiet little wife, Roxanna, poked her head around the corner. "Oh. You're awake." she whispered shyly. "Would you like something to eat?"

She then proceeded to cook up the most incredible breakfast I have ever eaten—country-style steak with plenty of gravy, mouth-watering fried eggs, hot, homemade biscuits swimming in a sea of liquid butter, and huge cups of strong, steaming-hot coffee—Southern style, with plenty of cream.

While I ate, she sat across from me, watching every move I made, with deep, deep blue-sad eyes that had something of the sky in their dizzying depths. . . these set close together under a broad ex-

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panse of clear, untrouble forehead, in a fragile milk-crystal face with real-live roses in the cheeks—the only ones I have ever seen on a chick, that didn't, some way or another, come out of a jar. Her amber-gold hair shimmered softly, playing catch and toss with the light—curling and flowing heavily down her neck, a honey-colored waterfall. She didn't fuss with it, or pat it into place constantly, but left it alone, to do as it pleased.

When I was through, and wiping my eggy mouth on a linen napkin, I said, "Thanks Roxanna, I. . ." and faltered, not knowing what to say, or how. I wanted to thank her in such a way as to impress on her just how grateful I was, and how utterly undeserving of her kindness I was, but she shrugged, a tiny, huddled-into-herself gesture, that made me strangely sad. . .she had the strange, shy grace (and quite a little of the quick, restless fear) of a woodland doe. She was almost blindingly beautiful, with those huge, hypnotic eyes.

Have you ever known anyone with eyes that seemed to swallow you, to encompass you completely? The fires of her psyche were banked not at all, but blazed up constantly, shooting arcing streams of energy-motes—the stuff of which souls are made—straight into my own. Looking into her eyes was *zzt* timelessness. I fell in love with her instantly, in the corniest (but only when it happens to someone else) late, late movie sense.

It occurred to me to ask about our heroes, to divert my mind from an apparently-useless track (after all, she *was* taken).

She said, "Oh, they left early this morning. . .they had a *mission*, or something. They said to tell you they'd be back by five. I'm supposed to take care of you till then."

The implication of this last (said with a sweet smile) slipped right by me and kept on going. I said simply, "Well, I would appreciate the use of your bathtub for a few minutes."

This was true. I hadn't bathed in something like two days, and I felt grimy to the pores.

She said, "Sure. Right down the hall. . .towels are on the second shelf."

I nodded gratefully, and hurried off down the hall.

Forty-five steamy, dreamy minutes later, as I stepped out of the tub, drying myself on a great shaggy towel that rasped the hide off, but felt wonderful anyway, I wondered what to wear. My clothes were stiff with speed-sweat and road-grime, and hardly fit to wear, fresh out of a bath.

But I found the problem solved for me. While I'd soaked in mighty clouds of steam, Roxanna had come in quiet as a whisper, taking out my dirties, leaving a purple silk kimono hanging on the doorknob. It had a snarling, fire-spitting dragon embroidered on

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the front, and I donned it gratefully, feeling deliciously like a Chinese mandarin. This, even though it was several sizes too small one way, and several too large the other. (The waist tied with a sash that barely went around my waist, but the hem flapped raggedly around my ankles. It was evidently one of Sam's.) I stepped out of the bathroom, feeling cool tile on my bare feet, and went quietly to the front room, intending to *really* thank her this time, but she was nowhere to be found.

I called her name and she answered, her voice coming faintly from the back of the house. I walked in the direction of the sound.

I slipped under a clack-clattering bead curtain, into a murkily-lit, incense-filled room. When my eyes adjusted to the dim light (a red bulb is the only illumination), I saw Roxanna curled up on a mattress on the floor, soft and smooth naked skin glowing like burnished gold.

I did a slow, stupid, gulping "Uhhh", standing in the middle of the floor, all pretenses of cool shattered. She moved over slightly, patting the space thus made for me.

Too stunned for intelligent comment, I stammered dumply, "But you're Sam's chick. . ."

"He doesn't own me. He knows that." she said, with a petulant shake of her head. "What's the matter, don't you want me, now?" Her chest heaved breathlessly, as she reached out to stroke my bare forearm. I recoiled from her touch as if she was electrified. With lower lip quivering, she said, "Please. . .don't make it complicated. I like you, and I want to make you happy. What's wrong with that?"

She looked down quickly, clear tears starting up in her eyes. "But that's not it, is it? It's me. . ." Her voice broke, as she said, "And I did so want to make you happy. . ." Pause. Then she turned back to me, wiping at the tears that overflowed her brimming eyes. With trembling defiance, she said, "What is it? Am I so ugly, or what?"

I found myself pushing her hair back, brushing helplessly at her tears with my hands, saying, "No. . .No, it's not like that at all. I just. . ." I faltered, unable to go on.

"Then, what is it?" she demanded tearfully.

I stared at my feet silently, eyes swimming in a blurry haze—remembering pain. . . hurt. . .remembering someone that almost was. So long ago that I'd almost forgotten. . .or almost *succeeded* in forgetting, until this scene brought the memories flooding back with painful intensity.

She said suddenly, seeming to read what was in my mind, "Oh! I didn't mean to hurt. . . That is —oh, I fuck everything up!" Burrowing her face in the pillow, she

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flailed tiny fists against the silk. I gazed at the spot between her shoulder blades, where the sobs were racking her body—reached out a hand and laid it softly on the satiny skin of her shoulder, stroking it gently, soothingly. She rolled over, her eyes red streaked and full of deep sorrow. Eyes that were so swimmingly luminous and alive that I feel pulled in, swallowed whole. . .feeling the sorrow she felt—more like Sorrow—sadness incarnate—for a world full of sad and separate, cold and oh-so lonely people, who don't know how to touch each other. Or won't, fearing the loss of a part of their oh-so treasured self.

She stretched out her arms to me, smiling beautifully as the blanket slid down around her tiny hips—her golden hair streaming down her neck, one shimmering curl perfectly encircling and outlining a tiny, china-white breast.

And it was beautiful. . .I suffered hot shame for the dark thoughts I had held (or that had held me) and the indescribable beauty I had been afraid to open my eyes to. I pulled her close, feeling her eyelashes blink-blink against my cheek, and I was crying myself now, but silently, the tears that had at long last broken through the dams of crusted brine and bile washing away the pain, the fear and the hurt, like God's good eraser.

She took my face between two dove-soft hands—looking deep into my eyes with her own, those liminous pools of softness pulling at me, tugging at the hung-up Self that was me—taking all the bad, sad, mad thoughts and vaporizing them, drawing me into the calm aura of herself. . .falling into those bottomless, misty depths, falling without end—and it's good. It's peace. The end.

And suddenly, almost without transition, we're laughing, fumbling and loving. I leaned over, bruising her soft, receiving mouth, until our faces were covered with our own, and each other's saliva—drawn together magnetically in a wetly voluptuous world of love.

She took my hand, kissing each of the fingers in turn, blessing them and this act, with all the power she had to project. Then she guided it down, across a forest of baby-fine, intricately-curled hairlets—into a soft and dark, warm and electrical place. My fingers paused at the entrance, a soft, yielding mass of unfolding flesh. A pause, as the universe of *I* held its breath—one finger entered, did a slow, three-quarter turn, unlocking the key to the cosmos—the key and the secret of all beginnings—the Dance of Life.

Meanwhile, I felt her hands caressing my chest, felt silk gliding off my shoulders with a sigh and a shudder. I felt myself responding to the soft ecstatic pressure of her hands—curving and arching upward to meet her. All the while, she holding me—the

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essence of me—the soft pods of my manhood cupped in her gentling fingers.

Drift over slow and couple—my head spins with the first few blows of my sliding damply into her. The pressure of our lovemaking subsides. . .then speeds back up and the same instant, and I begin to lose myself in the all-time flashing rhythm, surging together at the waist—awash in a sea of feeling.

I glanced at her face momentarily, then went rigid, my eyes locked, not daring to break my gaze, tracing the line from jaw to chin—a soft pastel shadow. . .Holding on tight all the while, willing myself not to give in to it—not yet—riding the waves of molecular energy-rush like a surfer in a maelstrom.

And suddenly my vision blanked out entirely, from a pressure building back of my eyes, expanding to fill the universe. I tried once more to hold it back, but it's like stopping an ocean wave with your bare hands—just that senseless, just that impossible. But it was all right. . .for I saw that she, too, was going under. Her eyes were glowing slits, behind all-but closed lids, tongue a pink triangle, the tiniest fraction out between her teeth, lungs laboring like a mountain climber.

I let go suddenly, unwilling and unable to hold it a second longer, as we surged together in a last convulsive embrace—an explosion—then rolled over and fell back as one, exhausted.

VI.

AFTER WE GOT DRESSED she in a long flannel dress, me in my street clothes, which were by this time dry), she moved gracefully around the house, doing sweet woman-things. . .doing my fortune with the Tarot, and just talking, laughing, turning the world over in her hands, all in that clear, dreamy voice of hers. Until she said suddenly, "Oh! I've got to get dinner started. . .Sam and the Kid will *be* here in thirty minutes." That's the kind she was—sort of Zen-egoless, the kind who need a buffer between her and the world. Not that she was helpless, exactly, she was just. . .strange. I don't know. . .

She took me by the hand, leading me into the livingroom, saying, "Sam's got a few comic books he thought you might want to look over. The Kid said you used to read Marvels." I wondered when I had told him that, as she said, "I've gotta go now, Baby. See you later." Cool fingertips lightly brushed my cheek, as she flowed out of the livingroom.

And Sam did indeed 'have a few comic books.' A complete up-to-date collection of all of Marvel's super hero books, in addition to a separate file for the ancient monster-fantasy comics.

It was about a half hour later,

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with Dr. Strange newly-returned from the Purple Dimension, exhausted after battling the dread Dormammu to a standstill—when the Deranged Duo bustled in the front door, Sam in the lead, carrying a brown paper grocery bag like a quarterback on a TD run. He was followed closely by the Kid, spouting gibberish mixed with random numbers—some thing like "47-26-44-hike!"—rushing through the door, taking out two of his unseen opponents with a rolling block—taking one down to the floor, strangling the life out of him—face red and horribly contorted—teeth clenched—it was too real. . .I was mentally shouting for him to stop, when he rose, brushed himself off with stiff dignity, and bowed.

Sam clapped loudly, roaring, "Bravo! Bravo!". I noticed the paper bag at his feet, wondering what. . .

From the folds of his greatcoat, he produced a huge, incredible weed-cigar, bigger than the fattest, most outrageous old man's cigar. I mean it—it was at least a foot long, and three fingers around at the middle.

Sam dumped out the contents of the bag—a broken key in a shoebox—and sat, happy-smiling, cleaning the brick, while the Monster Joint circled round and round, hovering like some great stone vulture, pausing periodically to pick up one, or the other of us, to jolt and shake him in waves of vast, ego-melting weed-rushes . . .sort of a wham! mininova between the eyes.

When that one was done, and another smaller version of it had followed it around, Sam stood up and swiveled around in outer-space-undersea slow motion, saying, "Ya'll wanna hear some sounds?" Without waiting for a reply (or rather, seeing that none was forthcoming) he put an album on. . .*Like A Rolling Stone.* Dylan's mocking, haunting, and oh-so perfect voice hissing acidly: *Ahhh-once upon a time you dressed so fine,*

Threw the bums a dime in your prime–didn't you?

People called, say Beware girl, yer gonna fall,
Ya thought they were all a-kiddin' you. . .

The faintly evil organ whine perfectly accentuating and underlining the words: *Ya never turned around to see the frowns*

On the jugglers and the clowns
When they all did tricks fer you
Never understood that it ain't no good
You shouldn't let other people get their kicks fer you

And so on, crucifying Miss Lonely with a thousand barbed word spikes, nailing her to the cross of her innocence. Dylan, what deep black hellworld *does* your genius come from?

Meanwhile, I looked up, and there was Roxanna, hands on her hips, a tight little frown on her face. A smudge of flour, like a powdery-white gullwing, showed

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the trace of where she pulled her hair behind her ears. Shouting to be heard above the Satanic stereo-scream, she said, "I've been calling you guys to dinner for a half an hour, and I just came in to see if you were dead, or what?" Laughing.

Tension suddenly vibrated in the charged air between them. And, even as I watched, a single stream of unrelenting hostility poured itself from Sam's eyes. A cruelly vibrating spark of hate, of death, of loathing, snapped from his eyes.

And in that unguarded moment—as quick as a heartbeat—Rozanna stumbled back as if struck, eyes pulled wide open in fear.

Then Sam, suddenly aware of my eyes, laughed with bluff heartiness, saying, "No, not quite, Not yet, anyway." But his good nature seemed forced, like a quick, instinctive cover-up.

The whole exchange had taken only a few seconds, and with the drugs and everything, I could have passed it off as my imagination, except for the narrow, calculating glint in Sam's eyes, as he studied my face over dinner.

After dinner, we moved back in the livingroom. Then began the Serious Dope Smoking.

Sam put on a stack of albums, and, producing a curved briar Professor's pipe, began an endless succession of bowls. The Kid meanwhile, began rolling joints out of *his* stash. One for one, they matched each other. Offering for offering—building that unattainable goal of goals: The Perfect Stone.

The circle was as follows, on Sam's L-shaped living room couch: Sam on the far left, Roxanna seated next to him, the Kid in the bend of the L, and me to his right.

Sam started off with what became a titanic Shotgun Contest. Like ancient Roman gladiators, he and the Kid took turns about, blowing each others' brains out —the recipient, wreathed in a dense cloud of smoke, falling backward, tumbling thru depths of no-space, no-time, to rise back up, and return the blow. And so on. . .

After a time, the Kid's stack of ammunition was diminished. Sam took the opportunity to change pipes, trading in the resin-soaked specimen he had been using for a fresh one, identical to the first. Grinning maniacally, he filled it to the brim with fresh green weed, topping it off with a chunk of hash as big around as my middle finger.

Serious power in gear. . . .candle flames bobbing seductively in time to:

Awww I would not feel so all alone,

Everybody must get stoned. . .

As I was recovering from a particulary harrowing hashish-borne head explosion, I looked up at the departing backs of the Kid and Roxanna. She was saying to Sam,

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"We're both pretty tired hon. I think we're gonna go and crash." Then, looking at me, "Oh, wait a minute." She strode off toward the back of the house, returning to view a few moments later, with a thick, heavy quilt and pillow. Spreading them out on a now-unfolded couch-bed on the other side of the room, she said, "You can sleep here tonight." Then, turning back to Sam, she kissed him lightly on the cheek, saying, "Come to bed pretty soon, Baby."

Sam sat silently for a few moments, then got up, sighing resignedly, and shuffled over to the bureau. "Time for some acid, I guess. . ." he said, retrieving a bright red capsule—dumping the contents over the bowl he already had filled and ready. Lighting a corner and handing it to me, he said, "Take small tokes at first—you'll feel it soon enough."

I did as he suggested, and we each got three of four hits off the acid-laden top of the bowl. When it had burned down past that, into the plain weed, he said suddenly, "Yer probably wonderin' what that scene was about, here a few minutes ago. . .right?"

I shrugged, saying, "Ah, it's really none of my business."

Pointing the pipe stem at me—wetly glistening with saliva—he said, "Well, I'm gonna tell you about it. . . Cause if you're travelin' with the Kid, I think you oughtta know." He paused, for another toke, and a minute of consideration, then went on, "You remember what the Kid told you about how we met? Somethin' about being in a little bar on the Strip in Atlanta? Well that was purest bullshit. . .entirely, from beginning to end. We met not quite two years ago, in this very town." Taking another toke, then passing it to me, "See, Roxanna has a habit of pickin' up strays. She'd adopt every ragged-ass orphan in the world, if she could. It's just the way she is—and I love her for it, but it does make things a bit complex at times. Yeah." He stopped making words, his mind and eyes unfocused, seeing some other time, another place. "Anyway, she found the Kid wandering around the airport in somekinda drug frenzy—totally spaced, she said later. . .didn't know where he was, or what he was doin' there. So she brought him home with her. And she fell in love with him—those big, little-boy eyes, I imagine. . . Anyway, he lived with us the best part of a year, and I grew to accept him, first as another part of Roxanna's life, then as a part of my own. I grew to love him, first as a son, sort of, then as a brother, and finally as a part of myself. I was the first to turn him on to his own bisexuality, and it freaked him considerably, but he soon adjusted to the scene. She kept him in decent clothes, made him eat regular, and took care of him. See, when he came here, he was so mindless and freaked that he

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had forgotten how to feed and dress himself properly. He had been on some sort of a speed-acid suicide trip, stealing cars and flashin' across the country, leavin' them when they broke down, or ran out of gas." He paused for another toke, dumping the now empty bowl, and filling another, "Anyway, we took him in, and made him feel at home —something he's never had, apparently. We were one big, happy unit, livin' and workin' together. Then, he split. He left in the middle of the night, leavin' a weird note pinned to the door. Somethin' about how we were controllin' his mind, and he had to get out, if he was to stay sane and whole. He says now that it was just stoned paranoia, but I wonder. . .he's so strange. He just sorta flashed in, and just when we thought we were gettin' to know the *real* Kid, the one underneath all the masks, he split. I don't know, maybe that was what scared him off—somebody gettin' to know him. He's afraid of that, like nothin' else in the world." He sat back, lighting the fresh bowl. "Anyway," *phht*-suck "That's the story." Instead of blowing the toke out all at once, he sorta let it roll out, mixed with words, vowels muffled by thick smoke rolling out around his tongue. "But to hell with them for now. . .they're both gettin' what they want, but I'm not."

"What *do* you want, man?" I said slowly. I was very, very stoned.

Looking down at me, slumped on the couch, he smiled. It was a soft, sort of mysterious smile, like the Mona Lisa. Laying a hand softly on my knee, he said, "I want *you*, my friend."

I freaked openly, as a soundless explosion reduced my brain to nothingness, stammering; "I. . .I don't know how to deal with that, man. . ." confusion and turmoil coloring all my thoughts with a red haze. "I mean, I don't wanta hurt you or anything, but. . ." The stereo made the sounds of:

And you know something's happening

But you don't know what it is,

Do *you, Mister Jones?*

He looked into my face, all eyes, all eyes—turning my very soul over, probing, checking. Then he stood, his shoulders sagging visibly, saying, "Okay, man, I'm sorry. We'll see you in the morning."

I spent the rest of the night in a dizzy whirl, trying to digest what all had gone down this day, and, finally giving up, rolled over and faked sleep, hoping to fool myself into thinking it was the real thing. I finally did drift off into sleep (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) sometime that morning.

VII.

THE NEXT DAY, I awoke to find my brain scoured by rough sand-

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paper, leaving an oozing raw sore. Sam was his usual, slightly-withdrawn self, and I could see that he wished not to be reminded of last night. The Kid seemed strange—strange even for him. He had been speaking less and less, and several times I caught him watching me—nothing overt, of course, but I got the feeling that whenever I turned his way, I would meet his eyes for just a fraction of a flash, before he let the gaze evaporate, looking elsewhere. Like he was trying to tell me something, warn me of some danger that he couldn't name, or even speak about.

As for myself, I felt as if I was totally lost—alone, but not the master of my own fate. Adrift in a scene not of my own making—reminded constantly of the immutable gap between me and the people I was around. And Sam and the Kid were so bizarre. . .seeming always to be on the edge of some dark cataclysm, totally unreal, speaking in unintelligible parables. Rozanna, by contrast, seemed so warmly normal and stable that I feel drawn to her almost magnetically. But the very strength of the attraction made me doubt its authenticity—I kept thinking about what the Kid said about them controlling his mind—what if it *wasn't* just stoned paranoia. . .? I didn't know anymore. No, that wasn't right. I never did know, and I was no closer to knowing now. One thing I *did* know though. . .things had taken a turn toward the strange.

AS OUR VISIT grew longer, and the days turned to weeks, the Kid grew increasingly restless. The vibes between us grew more tense and uneasy with the passing of every day—until one day, when I awoke to find him fully dressed and standing by the door. I crawled out of my couch-bed, rubbing sleep out of my bleary eyes, rising to face the merciless rays of a glaring morning sun.

Sam asked me to stay on with them, out of politeness—or so I thought. But then Roxanna came to me and, kneeling, kissed each of my fingers in turn in that same stylized ritual I'd observed before—reminding me of an unspoken promise. Holding my hand in both of hers, and looking up into my rapidly-coloring face, she enveloped me in those huge, hypnotic eyes. With a note of pleading almost, in her soft whispery voice, she said, "Won't you *please* stay. . .for me?"

With her words, a peculiar feeling swept over me—once more falling into her luminous eyes, but with a difference. The difference between an LSD freakout rush, and a high, happy union with the flow. . .one is warm, inviting. . .the other cold and electrically entrancing. Even so, another part of myself that was not-Self stood outside, curiously watching the proceedings—but helpless to do anything about

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them but to observe.

The fear accompanying this scene was merely a dull, persistent warning signal—an alarm clock ringing and ringing, when you long to do nothing more than to roll back over and go to sleep. It was in this spirit of numb resistlessness that I felt my tongue moving thickly, starting to form words of acceptance. . .when the Kid slapped me on the shoulder, hard. There was more than simple impatience in that blow, and I felt myself sliding back out of the mind-fog.

I snapped out of it, shaking my head to clear it, saying, "I'm sorry. . .but I just gotta go." Guiltily, with a sense of backing out of an agreement I could hardly remember making, and the terms of which I recalled not at all. The vibes were. . .as they say, 'uptight'.

—Like the way Sam was glaring at me just now—his face clouded over and condensed into a mask of cloudy darkness, with all-but-hidden lightnings flickering wickedly. His eyebrows seemed to warp and flow like molten metal, before running together and knitting with a clink, his eyes underneath them, two glowing, angry pinpoints, half-shut, like a lizard's.

Or the way Roxanna was looking at him in open fear, like an often-beaten collie begging her master for mercy in a silent look. Meanwhile, like a well-edited sound track, the stereo made the sounds of:

Look out kid, you're gonna get hit,

By losers, cheaters, six-time users,

Hangin' round the theaters,

Thrilled by the whirlpool, lookin' for a new fool. . .

So I slunk out, fearing to ask the question I had intended to. Sam gave us, in addition to a complimentary ounce of Colombian, a couple of his calling cards. They read:

Atlanta Sam. . .A deal for your soul

In the Yellow Pages under HELL.

LATER, AND MANY MILES from the house, the Kid looked back over his shoulder, as if expecting someone, or something to be following us. Then turning to me he hissed brutally from between clenched teeth, "Yer a goddamned *fool*! You know that? You were lucky to get out alive back there. . . Don't you realize the forces yer playin' around with now?"

I looked up astonished at this tirade. The strangled "Wha-at?" that escaped my lips was only the beginning of my question, but he answered it as if to the whole.

"I'm talkin' about the way you let yourself get suckered into Sam's games, and the way you let Roxanna almost completely trap yer mind. I didn't realize just how deep you were in, until it was almost too late."

"What're you talkin' about?" I

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blurted helplessly.

"Don't you remember, lover boy?" he shot back acidly. Cold, really cold.

"Wait a minnit, man. . ." I said angrily, "you balled her too. . ."

"No, man," he said, shaking his head. "I know what it's like—the thing she does with her eyes. . ." That jogged my memory, as he went on, "it's like fallin' *into* her eyes. . .an' you just wanta keep on falling forever. And the more often she does it, the more you come ta look for it, and finally, to depend on it. I know man. . ." he said painedly, "I've been that route."

"Yeah?" I said indignantly, "how come you lied to me about where you met Sam?"

He looked at me sadly, saying, "Sam musta told you everything. . .yeah, well I told you that lie in hopes that I could prevent you gettin' hooked like I did. . ."

"Whatta you mean, man? they're good people," I said indignantly.

". . .but I guess I was too late." he finished.

Stunned and confused, I said, "Well what kinda people are they, anyway?"

He broke off, to stare at me somewhat amazedly, saying, "Don't you *see*?" with a strange, stressful inflection on the word *see*. "Roxanna's an empath, you know what that is?"

I nodded, and he went on, "Not that she's *just* an empath. . .she's got that other thing too. One of 'em is that hypnotic kinda thing we were talkin' about just now. . .even though it's not really like hypnosis at all, that's close enough. It's like this, man. . ." he said, spreading his hands in a typically expansive gesture, "picture two magnets. Right. . .it's like her mind is the more powerful magnet, in fact so strong that it can actually reverse the poles on the weaker magnet. That's pretty much the way it works. The funny thing is that it's not something she does consciously. When she gets to know someone, if she feels strongly about them, it happens of itself. 'Course it does come in handy for Sam, in his line of work. . ."

"What the *fuck* are you talking about man?" My mind swirled sickeningly. . .was my friend really *that* insane? "What kinda work does he do? I thought he was some sort of professional free-lance dope dealer."

He repeated his question, "Don't you *see*?" Then I heard him mumble distractedly, half to himself, half to a nonexistent third person, "No, he doesn't. Strange. . .I can look at him and *see* that he does, but all his actions tell me he doesn't. I was a fool not to see it before. . .but I thought. . . Well, never mind what I thought." He dropped the subject entirely then, to talk about something totally unrelated. And for all my prompting and cursing, he wouldn't say another

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word about it.

Things were turning strange. We were passing through one of those cloudbursts that crop up on the road with such explosive suddenness, and I saw, or thought I saw, a man stepping out into the road, full in the glare of my headlights.

He didn't look to either side, or at me, even as I bore down on him, simply striding forward with mad purposefulness. I stomped down on the brake, knowing it was too late, but—incredibly—skidding and swerving past where he shoud have been, but wasn't. Expecting to hear a sickening thump-thump as I smeared the unknown pedestrian to jelly—hearing instead the eerie singing silence, broken only by the *squeeeeal* of bald tires fighting for a hold on rain-slick pavement.

I turned to the Kid after the car had stopped, expecting to read fear, shock or amazement on his face, at my unaccountable actions, but he was frowning—that's all—a tight, puzzled little frown, like there was something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He said, "You *saw* him too?" A question. I nodded, and he nodded in turn, wisely, like he'd finally figured it out. With an uplifted forefinger, he traced a circle in front of my eyes, saying, "Ahah. . .you do *see*. You just don't know what it is. . ." He shook his head in amused amazement, laughing out loud at some grand private joke. "Goddamn helluva note. . ." he said, "I spend half my life tryin' to do what comes natural as breathin' ta this guy."

I said, "Did you see that man too?"

He answered me cryptically, saying, "Yeah, I *saw* it, but it wasn't a man."

"Whaddya mean, it wasn't a man? You mean he wasn't real?"

"Oh yeah, it was real enough, though maybe not what you'd call 'real'."

"Well, what was it?"

"Never mind, whatever it was, you didn't hurt it, that's sure enough." Then, "Really man, never mind. Don't even try ta figure it out, you'll just stretch yer brains all out of shape." With a little laugh: "Yeh. . .it does kinda explain things though." A big laugh and, "Here man, you deserve it. . ." He handed me the most recent joint. I took it automatically, but handed it back without smoking any.

"No thanks man, I think I've had my limit. . .seein' people walkin' in the road. . ."

He burst out laughing at that, holding his sides and gasping for air. Finally he said, "Great. . .but here. . ." handing me the joint, "prescription from Doctor Koz—I guarrantee it won't do you any harm. Fact, it's the best thing for you."

It was true, I didn't feel that stoned—not twisted bad enough to be seeing things that weren't there. . .and the joint was calming me down, taking the rough

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edge off my jagged nerves. I realized I was shaking, and had been doing so ever since whatever-it-was that wasn't there ran out in front of my car.

VIII.

THIS WAS THE BEGINNING of the period of my life that I spent on the road with the Kid. It only amounted to a few months clock-time, but in terms of the changes wrought in me, it could have been a hundred-year epic voyage.

I couldn't begin to tell of all the adventures, the wild trips and stoned happenings that went on with this or that newly-met, totally mad, friend of the Kid's. All the faces—the strange people, the sad people, the honestly trying to be honest people, that he met or knew or hung with, before moving on again.

Like the time we got snowed in, in Peoria—all alone in an apartment with two of the most beautiful chicks I have ever seen. It was forty below and snowing, with a foot on the ground. Nothing moved, anywhere, except inside. The one I spent time with, Sahra, was a virtual gyroscope in bed. She nearly screwed my brains out, is what I'm trying to say. French ticklers and MDA, that was her trip.

Funny thing though, I don't remember hearing her say a word. . .aside from assorted sounds of passion I mean. We must have talked at some point, between sessions, as it were (we stayed there a week, till the drifts melted enough that we could move the car), but I don't remember.

It was as if Sahra, and her friend (whose name I forget) were two singularly responsive genii that the Kid conjured up out of nowhere. Looking back on it now (a future now, at this point), the whole trip had the misty, unreal quality of dreamwork—logic distorted, details muzzy, leaving me with the feeling that there was something, some other level of the experience that slipped right by me and kept on going. It was something small, surely, and at times, I felt as if I was on the edge of grasping it. . .seeing it out of the corner of my eyes, but feeling it slithering out of hand when I went to turn my full gaze on it. It was bound to have been something small, barely noticeable in fact, but it just might have made the whole trip make sense. . .

Well, in a way there was. . .because always, no matter how far out on a tangent we went, there was always, in the back of our collective mind, a sense of the mysticosmic applications of our journey, this Great Pinball Quest we were engaged in. For, with time, the Kid had been able to teach me to play well enough that, even if I couldn't precisely keep up with him, at least I could keep him in sight. I could even,

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at times, get a hint into the cellular symbolism of the machine—it was just the old karmic reincarnational thing after all. The ball is brought up from the bowels of the machine, and set out, with a certain karmic load, upon the field of chance and probability that is Life. And the extent to which the player can make himself one with the whirring electronic dance, the fluid-timeless pinball process, determines the game.

Of course it's not quite that simple. . .the best laid plans *do* go astray, the best-kept runs may last for a long time, but eventually, inevitably, they do end. "The machine giveth, and the machine taketh away," as the Kid is fond of saying. For the machine demands perfection—all you can give of your best, and then some. For the slightest mistake, or miscalculation is instantly paid for. The machine doesn't give second chances often, and even then, with the whimsical arrogance of absolute power. And if you're scared, weak, or desperate, you might as well hang it up—the machine will somehow sense out your state, and bat you down unmercifully without a chance. "If the machine's out to get you, you're gonna get got," another of the Kid's seemingly-inexhaustible store of Pinball Proverbs.

I found that I had to be very pure to play good pinball. The slightest hesitation, worry-fear, or ego-trip, and the ball flashed out irrevocably, inarguably, and the whole thing drained away from you. But sometimes, when things lined up just exactly right, I could almost see what it was I was after. The timeless play of energy beyond form, the E of Einstein's equation, all this I saw in fleeting, jumbled glimpses. I caught quick peeks (it's only for a moment) into a high, shining Kingdom of the Mind, home of the Immortals —those who have transversed its misty passages, breathed its rarefied air, and brought back pieces of it for the world to see. Each walked here, and so did Beethoven. They came by different routes, but their destination was the same. Beethoven came in withering blasts of ego-dissolution, spaced between shuttling cellular interludes that are too freaking real to deny. Bach came by the pastoral route originally, though he took time out for a few towering chrystalline structures of his own.

Yes indeed. . .Dostoyevsky walked here. So, for that matter, did Dylan. And most especially, the forever anonymous creator of the Bally Fireball. Ahh, the Fireball. The epitome of everything the pinball machine is, can, and should be. The consummate expression of pinball skill and subtlety, it rewards and punishes, action for reaction, with cold, mathematical impartiality. Even apart from the play, the machine cabinet is a work of Art, with its pseudo-surrealistic renderings of orange-red creatures with nar-

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rowed eyes and fangs wickedly bared in snarls of amusement or rage (I've never been quite sure which, myself)—the Fire Gods. The Kid loved the Fireball with the air of a music master toward a favorite Bach composition, constantly polishing and refining his performance of it, tirelessly working among its complexities, seeking the *right* way to do it. It's a good machine, a great machine, that has brought many a transcendental experience to a bored, back-alley pool hall. It's very much an all-or-nothing machine, one that you either do incredibly well, or despairingly bad on. It's the most karmically responsive, yet savagely unforgiving of machines, a jealous god that demands full attention and devotion, and gets it. . .for the rewards are as great as the consequences of failure.

Turning over a Fireball is a feat worth being proud of. It's a victory hard-won by skill. . .not assigned you by Luck, Chance, or the other whims and vagaries of the Pinball Experience. "The proverbial Good Game," as the Kid would say.

In the time I spent on the road with the Kid, I learned amazingly little about him as a person—he was an intensely nonverbal sort, and his approach to Life was a kind of spur-of-the-moment vibe steering that he expected me to understand and deal with myself. He was much given to strange spontanaiety and unaccountable craziness at times, and almost always fielded my questions with a reference to the fact that I knew what the answer was, if I would only let go and *see*.

The only subject he was really lucid on was the Pinball Experience, and its applications. I gathered that the pin machine represented many different things to him, on many different levels. First, it was, to his turn of mind, the ultimate *game*—human skills and reflexes versus flawless electronic complexity. Flipper action was the main part of it—timing, calculation of the flipper stroke, two-flipper coordination, and the like, but a certain amount of creative gunching, plus whatever telekinetic, or teleportational powers you might happen to possess, were essential for the maintenance of a long run, no matter how well set up, planned, or executed. For, given time, the machine will shoot down anyone and everyone who gives it a try. The real skill comes in when, by all normal logic, you should have lost it long ago, but manage to keep it in, in the teeth of all odds or reason. To know the precise amount of jerk needed, to free the ball from whatever predicament has arisen, without tilting the mechanism and losing it all. It's an ugly moment—when all the lights go out at once—all but that bright yellow light that screams TILT, while the ball drains out in undersea slow-motion, thudding off lifeless

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thumper-bumpers, rolling down dead and useless flippers, trundling aimlessly on out the Hole to oblivion. . .The Void.

This is where the second level takes up, that of the pinball machine as symbol of the Ultimate Quest. . .for shuttling, electronic enlightenment. The playing field is a modular construction (scaled down to size, of course) of applied karma, which is a valid, workable definition of Life. Losing control of the inestimable silver ball, symbol of all our hopes and dreams, equates with ego death-rebirth, the old cosmic flip. And, as a good pinball game is played right up to the limit, so it is with life. Death is something to be faced daily, dealt with, and measured by. Death was the yardstick by which the Kid's trip was constantly shaped and redefined. His life was lived out on the swaying tightrope, razor-edge of all sanity, Edge of all life. A step too far and. . .endless, careening craziness. . .black darkness. . .the Pit from which there is no return. But to race right up to that Edge, pulling back only at the last possible instant—that was a thing of true beauty. And power, as all things which are touched by Death are powerful.

The third level, the one I was never too clear about, was the pinball machine as power object. This was why the motif, the whole myth generated, and supported by the machine, was so deadly important.

This seemed to be a crucial element in his whole psychic makeup—ordinarily he seemed to be so manic, to expend so much energy in a thousand different directions, that I was surprised to find all the conflicting elements in him resolved. It was one part Zen mind-games, one part lysergic powers of concentration, fed and fueled by amphetamine energy.

From time to time, he would drop enigmatic hints as to the nature of the Power, as he called it. But I could always tell when the conversation was verging on an unveiling of the same, because he got tense and restless, hunching over like a cat ready to pounce. He would deftly field all my questions either with obvious cosmic bullshit, or meaningless methedrine double-talk.

When I asked him why he was so evasive on the subject, he would snap, "You don't learn by askin' questions. You learn by *seeing*, and by living your life strategically."

But once, and once only, he dropped his guard for a few seconds and told me just why he refused to discuss the subject. "You gotta do it on yer own," he said. "Cause the Power is big, bigger than anything you ever dreamed about. It takes a special kind ta handle that kind of power. So the time you spend fumbling around for it is necessary. It builds the kind of inner strength that you need to handle the responsibilities

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that come with having it."

"It's an old secret," he said. "Almost as old as the existence of people here on the planet. Different people do different things with it, different applications, depending on how they cop their juice. The outwardly-directed are the ones we read about in the history books—the world-shakers and empire-builders. But they're the ones that usually wind up being destroyed by it in the end. The ego-freaks, Power is like candy to a kid. They don't usually know quite what to do with it, so they just wanta go on tasting it forever.

"The inwardly directed are the seekers after Truth, the searchers, the ones who journey to the oddest possible places, at the oddest possible times. For theirs is a quest with no end in sight, save Death. . .theirs to unravel the Ego Question: Who am I? What is the nature of my true being? And in the final event, the answer to all these is one: Nothing. For all things in the universe exist only as projections on one narrow level of reality, Energy manifesting itself in ever-changing, transient forms. But in the Final Reality, there is nothing and no one. . .nowhere."

THE KID was an incredibly complex creature, driven by largely unaccountable impulses, down the strange tangents of his own twisted destiny. But still all in all, the Kid was very much a product of his times—of the techno-society that had produced the solenoid flipper, LSD and the A-bomb, all in the same ten-year stretch. But he was always moving on. . .he wouldn't stand still long enough for a definition to hang itself on him—strange, space-age mutant genius that he was. He was the Master of Electricity. . .the Kozmic Kid. He was always on top—in command of the situation, riding the crest of an Energy wave high and far. He didn't think he'd ever come down. . .but he did, one day. He fell so hard it broke his mind and killed him.

But goddamn, I'm getting way ahead of myself. . .for the sake of the record, I'll have to try to explain. Or at least record the variables that lined up to make what happened, happen.

IX.

IT WAS THE TIME of the year when spring is just beginning to believe in itself. There was a high, golden freshness to the air that was intoxicating, after a long, musty winter of mind-games and mazes.

We had been on the road almost without letup, for six straight months, sleeping in roadside motels, and hustling, hustling. Drive like a bat outta hell to Chicago, stay in town maybe twelve hours, and then split for Boulder, Colorado. . . After a while, the strain on the body be-

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comes unbearable. Exhaustion stalked me like a bloodhound. I started living on synthetic mescaline and crank. And weed. And weed. . .

It's amazing just how far you can push yourself—if you've got enough crank to keep the pressure on—the body seems beyond protest, the senses beyond pain. For instance, when our dope stash (which had been considerable at the best of times) began running dangerously low, I could easily conceive of myself hauling ass for Mexico, maybe driving down to Colombia.

The Kid suggested Frisco as a more logical alternative—being as how it was a time-honored Sanctuary, and home for the homeless, and closer, anyway. We calculated that we had approximately enough dope to get us there, but it was going to be close. The possibility of physical collapse was very real now.

But, Fortune favors the Brave, so I gobbled a couple hits of some good mescaline, took a snort of methedrine for luck, and set out, burning up the highway.

I envisioned myself driving all the way—and actually did make it all the way out of Colorado, and halfway into Utah, before I pulled over and let the Kid take the wheel. And only then because I was into a terminal case of highway hypnosis. So I aimed the Camaro toward the shoulder (the Rambler had long-since given up the ghost, or whatever it is cars give up, when they go to their reward), coming to a jolting stop amid great clouds of rolling yellow dust that showed up in two great cone-shaped tracks in front of the headlights. Eerie golden luminescence, against the pre-dawn desert sky. I clambered over into the back seat, falling immediately into a heavy space that was almost as resting as magic, illusory sleep, which it in many ways resembled. A heavy trance, laced with powdery smoke-dreams that almost made sense. . .

I WOKE LATE in the evening of the next day, just as the Kid was whipping off onto California 101, the coastal highway.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes and pulling my shirt off—rolling down both side windows, digging the air on my chest and arms, like cool, caressing fingertips.

The Kid looked up in the rear-view, cracking a grin and saying, "Well, goddamn me. . .it moved!" I laughed, and he fired a fat joint, passing it back over the seat. I sat back and took my first hit of the nearly-spent day, got spectacularly high watching the infinitely deep, swirling white mist that boiled magically up out of nowhere, spilling up onto our path in great thick ribbons of the stuff—thick, like cotton candy; but churning inwardly as if alive. At times, the road in front of us disappeared entirely in stretches of dense, can't-see-a-hand-in-front-of-your-face fog.

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See, California Highway 101 skirts the cliffs of the California coastline, hugging every canyon, every outcropping, like a breast-feeding baby with lockjaw. To the right of the coiling gray ribbon that supported us shelflike, were huge, towering cliffs. To our left, Oblivion. Literally. If the thousand-foot drop off the Edge wasn't the maw of Hell, it might as well have been, for all the difference it would have made. But we were separated from it by a whole *lane* of pavement, so I felt quite safe in leaning hanging out the window to look over the Edge. The haze parted briefly, and I glimpsed the ocean—a swaying basin of black velvet, shot through with shimmering pinpricks of phosphorescence. Indescribable! All that beauty right there over the Edge. . .a clean dive would be the best. . .plunging headlong, flying by the cliff-face, the air-rush snatching my breath as the momentum builds dizzyingly —knifing into the ice-cold water, twitching all over in a spasm of ego-dissolution, as the rocks and surf ground my illusory Self into nothing, rapidly spreading outward and merging, dissolving into the Flow. I'd like to do it with a head full of acid. . .stand on the brink of the fucker. . .do it just when the Peak hits. . .

What a rush. . .

"Are you gonna pass that goddamn joint back up here, or finish it yourself?" The Kid's snarl broke in on my thoughts.

I looked up quickly, in surprise, to see him grinning steadily at me in the rearview mirror—but with an intenseness I didn't recognize. He winked seductively, as he reached over his shoulder to take the by-now darkly stained roach I handed him. I remembered Sam's remark about how he had been the first one to turn the Kid on to his own bisexuality. I thought of his long, slender white fingers, and the steady looks I sometimes found upon turning around. He always let the gaze evaporate, sliding harmlessly onto something else with transition. But the vibe was there, hovering like an entity between us. If and when it came out in the open, I wasn't really sure I'd be able to deal with it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him stretch out a hand to me—his eyes in the mirror, locked magnetically on mine. I couldn't turn away, couldn't break the gaze. Time seemed to slow nearly to a stop in those few seconds. I felt as if my mind were being stretched out for examination—kneaded and probed. It wasn't a necessarily unpleasant sensation—one of being rhythmically squeezed by a pair of giant hands. At the end of a long, vertiginous instant, the grip was released, and my mind popped softly back into shape, with the resilience of a soggy tennis ball. But in that instant, unwillingly, uncontrollably, my hand

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snaked out to meet his—fingers stretching across the space between. . .

I felt the cold brass, and heard the raucous laughter at the same time. . . Pranked! I exhaled noisily, fighting off a case of the bends. . .sudden psychic decompression. Looking down at a tiny brass hash pipe, with a chunk of resinous-green, brittle, crumbly hash, with a fine layer of powdery-white mold spotting the surface like acne.

"Hash!" I nearly shouted. "God's hell, where'd you get this?"

"It's a gram I been savin' for a rainy day." He giggled, saying, "Well, it's foggy, anyway. I guess that's close enough. . .go ahead, fire 'er up."

I puffed it alight with some difficulty, inhaling a deep lungful of dense pungent smoke—rich and somewhat soapy tasting, it rolled luxuriously around my tongue. I passed the pipe up to the Kid, sucking in a small quantity of air behind the toke, packing it down. . .but a toke like I just had needs no packing down—that's when the trouble started.

I felt the bite first at the top of my throat, but it spread like seizure down my throat and lungs in a flash. A cough started from down deep, as I was thinking, "It's too much, I can't hold it." Trying to choke the still-rising cough, and let out some of the smoke—but gently, to relieve the pressure, failing miserably on both counts.

I wheezed raggedly, half the toke burning a sizzling streak on my irritated throat as it whooshed back up the way it came, erupting out my mouth and nostrils. I felt the first heave like a rabbit punch in the abdomen. I barely had time to register the second before it hit—a sizzling stream of liquid foamed burningly, rising in my throatlike bile. I aimed for the window, almost missing it, puking down the side of the car, burping, gulping, dead smoke and vomit pouring sometimes as one through my mouth, nose and (I felt like) ears. I've never been known to retch with any kind of finesse (as most peyote freaks are capable of), and anyway I was out of control. With the heaving, and the adrenalin, the dope got to work on my bloodstream like twelve tarantulas sleepwalking up my spine. Creamed. Too wasted to do anything when I was through, but fall back and moan a little. Roll up the window and lean my head against the glass, looking out at the dark awesome beauty that is Sur at night. The tall stately evergreens, the pristine sparkling beauty of crystal streams all mocking me with their serene elegance, their stately, magnificent grace—in fact a whole world of beautiful gods and goddesses, all humming peacefully along with the Flow, humming to a tune I didn't know how to listen to. "If a man does not keep step with his neighbor, perhaps it is because he

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hears a different drummer." Very true, in some cases. But he could be deaf. Or lame.

There's no worse feeling of self-disgust and loathing, than to be the only element of awkardness in a scene of grace and flow, and to know further, that you've blown it yet again. Dis-grace. Wretchedness. To be a twisted ugly dwarf, crippled and deformed, in a land of graceful giants. The Bungler. The wretchedly incompetent, the Sad Clown—funnier still for the sadness. People laugh. People hurt. And unknowingly most often, people destroy. The weak and the wounded, the clowns and the freaks. The down and the dying, the losers and freaks. Why bother with all that? Why not shoot yourself between the eyes and get it over with? Death's coming, one day—why not face it on your own terms, now.

But just then, like a well-edited soundtrack, cue up the sound of:

There must be somekinda way outta here. . .

Said the Joker to the Thief.

There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief.

The guitar is strange, it's not Dylan singing, but the words stand out clearly, echoing in my consciousness:

No reason to get excited. . .

the Thief he kindly spoke.

There are those here among us

who think that life is but a joke.

But you and I, we've been through that,

and that is not our fate.

So let us not talk falsely now,

The hour's getting late. . .

Trailing off into totally spaced guitar-talk, feedback and electronic buzz. But the message was crystal clear. . .standing out like cut diamonds in the mud. This strange message beamed directly into our car from Cosmos Central came like a last-minute reprieve to a condemned man—giving me the helping hand I needed, to get up out of the mire. That, and the knowledge that, somewhere, the Man is on the job.

The day had been hot and muggily oppressive, with a heap of thick clouds banked heavily against the western sky. Night fell thickly, like a claustrophobe's nightmare. . .moonless, starless and airless, or so it seemed. Or rather, with air so thick and moistly cloying, that it seemed to coagulate in my lungs, choking and blinding me, like being drowned in honey. Times like these, there's nothing you can do, but hold on, and hope it gets better. But doubting it, really doubting it. All life and light are hollow mockeries. Prayin's a joke.

But just as the last strains of "All Along the Watchtower" built to somekinda electronic orgasm, as the spade's voice crackled and boomed:

Two riders are approaching,

And the wind begins to howl. . ."

so help me God, a big, rattling

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gust of wind whipped singingly around the corner, just as the north sky erupted in a bluish-white crackle, the sky overhead opened up and poured a cool, holy portion of rain down on our heads.

After that, the tires made a steady whish, whish sound that was somehow reassuring, as the Kid whipped our vehicle through the turns that rippled and twisted back on themselves every ten yards with soothing, almost rhythmic regularity.

X.

SITTING SLUMPED in the back seat, I had been seeing the mud and gravel driveways that cut obliquely off the main road for some time, without really seeing them at all. The California cliffdwellers are, while being eccentric enough to be interesting, quite common enough to be taken for granted by the locals. Most are semi-hermits, old mountain rats that thrive on seclusion in large quantities.

So when the Kid swung onto one of these driveways just outside of Carmel, I was rather nervous—I could picture us, red-eyed and wasted, stomping in on some unsuspecting citizen's livingroom. I wasn't ready for that—not this close to Manson's old stomping grounds. They'd probably shoot first, and not bother to ask any questions after they saw what they'd killed. They probably wouldn't bother with a grave, not for two obvious degenerates such as ourselves—just throw us off the cliff and leave us for the crabs.

"Are you sure this is the right place man?" I muttered worriedly, paranoia pulsing redly thru my brain, as he fishtailed all the way around a screeching rain-slick turn—180 degrees, most of it on two wheels. He waved a hand airily, silently blasting on down the path, taking the turns with the cool arrogance of long familiarity. . .

All of a sudden, we flashed into a great domed enclosure, made up of miles and miles of interlocking leaves, and leafy branches. It was a veritable redwood cathedral—majestic in silence, and cool, leafy grace. The sunlight came down thru an incredible interwoven latticework of flickering, swaying tree limbs. Filtered and broken up into deep green dappled shadows, a perpetual lime green sanctuary, peaceful and golden, in the slantwise afternoon sunshine, with just the barest trace of a whoooooosh on the soundtrack, from the comfortably lost and distant traffic on Highway 101. The dense forest offered another pleasant bonus. . .it afforded practically limitless quantities of vast, inconspicuous privacy. Like having a redwood forest for your back yard. There was no way the cabin could be seen from the road, while the winding, quarter mile drive was

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clearly visible from the house at several points. It was clearly a well thought out, carefully strategic setup.

At nearly the last turn before we got to the house itself, just as we rattled across the wooden bridge, I was confronted with a sign, starting up out of the lime green darkness, bearing the legend:

NO LEFT TURN UNSTONED

I wondered vaguely if the pun was intentional, but soon forgot about it. for now, we were pulling up to a tiny little log cabin (it was actually more of a lodge than a cabin, but we won't go into that) parking by a second sign that cheerfully announced:

THE INSANITY FACTORY

in brave, blue and gold psychedelic script. . .

A small group of people stood in the front yard, shading their eyes and looking in our direction. A momentary flash of brightness caught my eye.

The tallest of those assembled, a ruddy-faced lunberjack type in a tee-shirt, broke off, and started walking out to meet us. The Kid's pace quickened with every step. . .until he sprinted the last few yards, into a bear hug of enormous proportions. The other guy picked him up around the shoulders, and swung him around, laughing wildly. A Prodigal Son reunion scene.

The Kid was positively glowing, he was so glad—he broke out in a grin from ear to ear, the moment he saw him—the gladdest I had ever seen him about meeting anyone.

He introduced us, saying, "This here is none other than Poor Boy George, the Electric Savior . . .undisputed Acid King of the world."

I was duly impressed. I had heard rumors of the man thru the underground—myths, more like it. He was a self-made acid millionaire at 25—father confessor to at least half a dozen rock bands that were now nationally prominent, plus God-know-how-many starving artists, writers and madmen. The Holy Alchemist in person. It was rumored that, at the peak of his career, a representative from the Dow Chemical Company called him to ask if he would accept a position as consultant in their Quality Control department. That's how good he was.

His acid was guaranteed pure—a uniform 350 micrograms per dose. . .he even took to trademarking his dope—stamping a big 'G' right into the tabs. It was like the acidheads' Good Housekeeping seal of approval —guaranteed to bring an extra buck a hit on the streets. As the legend of his dope spread to places as far away as England and Germany, he got cocky. He grooved on the notoriety of being an Underground Hero—an modern-day Robin Hood. A celebrity, no less.

And if there's one thing a dope

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dealer can't stand, it's publicity. It's sure death, one way or another. So he got popped.

And, after a long drawn-out court thing, he went to prison. That seemed to be the last anyone had heard of him.

But here he was—a little older, a little wiser-looking, but seemingly not affected by all that had gone down. His face was still lineless as a boy's, but—did I say he was unaffected? That's not quite what I meant. Rather, he wasn't adversely affected, but he seemed more cautious and wise than the manic superhero of which I had heard. I suppose Terminal Island did that for him.

He blushed, I swear he did, at the Kid's grandeloquent introduction, shrugging and saying, "Awwshit, Kid. . .I'm retired. . ." In a slow, backwoods drawl that was somehow hilariously funny. He looked not at all like an Electric Savior—more like a logger, or a high school football coach.

He looked a little like Paul Newman, except that he was bigger boned and better built. When I say built, I mean it. . .he could easily have been a TV wrestler, one of the good guys.

His hair was almost gone on top—all but a fringe that went from directly behind, and about two inches above one ear, around the back to the other ear. It looked like a reddish-blond clown wig—curls boiling up in the back like a bramble patch.

With those big warm Cocker Spaniel eyes, and a lopsided grin, he looked like a good-natured country boy grown old. He spoke softly, seeming preoccupied, but behind the facade lay an all-but hidden auro of power. He spoke with conviction springing from some secret inner wellspring of strength. The only time it showed was when he was into a rap, or some other high-energy activity. Then he was like a restless cat, pacing, rapping and gesturing wildly. Then you could feel the manic electricity, see the Acid King rising to the surface—the Electric Savior. . .

But then in a moment, it was gone again, like a fever passing, and he was back down to low level cruising speed. I can imagine what this place must have been like, back in the peak of the Thing that went down, between 65-67.

The Kid punched me in the ribs, saying, "This is the rest of the Family. . .E. J."—slim, a raven haired enchantress, "Russ"—a beady-eyes Ernest Hemingway, short, squat and musclebound, with tatoos all over both arms. He had a mustache that put every other mustache I have ever seen to shame—when he parted it, it hung in two long chunks down past his jawbone, like a walrus. When he let it hang down, using it as an all purpose bullshit strainer, it hung past his chin. "Bernie and Barney"—two flipped-out desert holy men, who looked enough alike to pass for

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identical twins, though they were not even from the same part of the country. They were a strange, telepathic duo—like some sort of a gestalt being. When we first came up, they were tossing a swirl-patterned dayglo frisbee back and forth. When it passed thru a certain patch of sunshine, it flamed into a blindingly bright light-smear. "And, finally, Del. and Shane"—two unidentified kids, approx. 12 or 13. The Kid said that there were one or two more around, but that this was the inner circle, so to speak, of the Electric Family.

We walked back to the house, George, the Kid and I. The rest politely excused themselves, and went off about their various occupations.

We entered, seating ourselves comfortably in George's strangely large living room—it seemed to take up nearly half of the entire cabin, with the big fireplace, and the picture window that looked out on a peaceful, fog shrouded redwood forest scene.

George was absently filling a bowl from the contents of a cut-glass decanter, nodding as the Kid put on a stack of records, when the Kid said, "Hey man, where's Shelley? I haven't seen him around."

George seemed to flinch momentarily, as he struck a large cowboy style wooden match on one of the exposed beams. Puffing the big, lumbering briar pipe alight, he said, "Here go, boys, have a hit of Ye Olde Special Mixture. . .a secret recipe that was handed down for generations in my family. Takes one part Mex weed for that ole-timey reefer taste, one part creme de Jamaican, hash-dusted for flavor, an' one part genuine one-toke Killer Colombian knockout weed."

Phhhht-sss, the big friendly bite at the back of the throat, a warm glow spreading. . .

"I'll get somethin' to drink. . .Kid, you want some kool-aid? Yeah. . .how about you?" A wink, and a grin that went right by me, nodding, *yesyes*.

Swaggering back out a few minutes, later, handing out the drinks, George laughed and said, "I guess I'd better warn ya, this kool-aid's only fer real tigers, what can handle the hard stuff, y'understand. . ." I laughed, thinking he was just into a case of the mouth runs, not really keeping track of much, drifting.

But boy, did I have cottonmouth. . .I took my cup at a gulp, and asked for a refill almost immediately. I had the taste of sand in my mouth, and the koolaid was delicious! I was dawdling over my second cup, when the Kid said, "Well, anyway, like I ast you before—where the fuck is Shelley? I wanta see 'im."

George seemed to stop, chagrined and reluctant, trying to choose carefully the words for how to say it. Finally, "Fact is, I

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don't know, right this minute. . .um, since he split, that is. . ."

The Kid was eyes, all-eyes. . .deep hurt welling up into a fiery spurt of rage. "I want him." The Kid said very slowly, very distinctly. Pressing his knuckles against his forehead till they turned white from pressure—screaming hysteria in his eyes.

George said helplessly, "Kid. . .he was just. . ." he faltered. "You two just weren't right fer each other. It'd never work out. . ."

But it was useless. . .the Kid was beyond logic, beyond reason, his eyes glazed over with hurt and fear in equal quantities, but dominated by stark, staring crazy hatred. "I'm gonna find that bastard, and choke the life out of him, with my bare hands," he said huskily, his hands twitching.

I was beginning to understand. . .hell hath no fury like a lover scorned. The vibes in the room were out of control insane, flat-out freaking Madness.

It was just at this moment that Russ made his entrance, carrying a leather zipup shaving kit. Saying, "Here Kid, I figured I'd go ahead an' get you a kit together. . .the usual, speed, acid, some hash, lids and a little mescaline."

The Kid glared balefully at him, saying, "Did you know about Shelley?"

The little man stared down at his feet, his silence a more eloquent reply than words.

"Why wouldn't anybody say anything, huh? I thought you were my friend, anyway, man. . ." He looked back and forth between him and George, then suddenly bolted. . .he headed for the car at a dead run, leaping in and firing it up.

I ran to the passenger side, shouting at him through the window, "Where the fuck are you goin' man?"

"I'm goin' ta catch up with Shelley. . .if you're comin', come on. If ya ain't, stay here—I'll pick you up when I come back."

By now Russ and George are standing beside me. George lays a hand on my shoulder, saying, "Go with him. . .but make sure he gets back."

The Kid softened for a moment, saying, "I'm sorry Russ—about those things I said. I was just. . .y'know." Russ nodded. He turned to George, as I climbed in, saying, "Soon as I settle this, I *will* be back—for good, this time."

"Hey man, you serious?"

"Yeah. I fought it fer a long time, but this *is* where I belong. I'm with you now." They shook hands, and the Kid turned around, raising a great cloud of dust as we peeled out. He went screaming down the driveway, skidding, sliding, nearly losing it as we swung out onto 101.

"Cool out, man! You're gonna kill us!" 101 is no road for bursts

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of speed—not unless you *plan* to commit suicide.

The Kid said, "Ah, you worry too much. . ." but he did slow down some. Neither of us was very willing to discuss this trip we were on. I certainly wasn't going to bring it up.

The main center of our attention was to get as seriously stoned as we could manage. The Kid was eating Ritalins like they were going out of style—smoking hash to take the edge off it.

This was before I found out the kool-aid was electric. The Kid simply assumed that I had picked up on George's hint back at the house.

Got that? My idea was to gobble some good mescaline, toke a little hash, and settle into a groove for the remainder of the trip. The kit bag that George laid on us looked like a mobile Police Narcotics Lab display. Glass and plastic vials clinked and twinkled, the many colored pills inside rolling around in their respective crystal prisons. I found the baggie with the mescaline in it under the flat black lump that was our hash.

Digging around with my first two fingers, I found a freak hit—it was two hits that had melted or fused together at the waist, Siamese twins style. Taking this as a sign, I dropped the whole thing, washing it down with the last few drops of kool-aid.

"Knock yerself out, man. . ." the Kid said incredulously. "You better hope there's some Thorazaine in that bag."

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered.

He said, "You knew the kool-aid was electric, didn't you?" I shook my head. He laughed a cosmic laugh, saying, "Wow man! You poor fool—yer gonna turn into somekinda wild animal in about twenty minutes. Whew! You got enough dope in you ta stop a bull elephant dead in his tracks! Seriously though, there ain't much for you to do at this point, but to settle back an' enjoy it." *Phhht-ss. . .* "Want some hash?"

Took a toke for luck. After I rode out the initial attack of the Fear, I found myself calmly fatalistic. If I don't come back, weeeeellllll—wherever they put me, I'll be satisfied if it's warm.

I settled back, waiting. But nothing was happening. No reason for me to stick around. . .so I settled back and closed my eyes. I went to sleep, in fact.

When I woke up, some time later, I looked at my watch out of reflex. I tried valiantly to focus on the dial, finally giving up entirely.

The lights from oncoming cars showed me how high I was—they were growing incessantly more jewellike—cracked prism crystal—splinters dashing at my light-blind cave-eyes.

I was stoned rubbery—lost, twisted, bent. I forced the thickening air into my lungs, like squeezing glue thru a pinhole. I

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was wired up—440 volts coursing my spine every second—jerking, twitching in roaring spastic trembles, as the body rushes hit, one after another.

I could barely move—but, straining with the effort, I reached for the kit bag. . .looking for a parachute drug of some kind, to take the clutch of this insane fucking stone off my neck.

But, by this time, I was falling in and out of myself so rapidly that I forgot what I was looking for. Impossible to maintain a whole thought, keep it steady in your mind—by the conclusion, you've forgotten the beginning. My eyes were attracted by the glint of an aluminum aerosol can. I picked it up, noting the balloon rubber banded to the side.

It took a moment of concentration to marshal my thoughts, and bring my tongue under control, to say, "What's this?" to the Kid, holding up the can.

He looked at it, then at me, then at my eyes—saying, "Man, you don't *need* that. . ."

"Just tell me what the fuck it is. . ." I snarled, my hands clawing uncontrollably at the seat cover.

He said, "Well, it's freon."

"What does it do? How do you use it?" I practically screamed. The slightest hesitation on his part made me want to grab him by the throat and shake him. I could feel my eyeballs swelling, getting ready to pop out of their sockets.

He said, "It's a good hit, if that's what you really want. . ."

"It's got to be better than here. How do I do it?" Why, hell, yes man, why not? Screw it on, all the way out to Edge City—

Following the Kid's instructions, I tipped the can upside down, letting a small amount of charged freon leak into the now limply half expanded ballon. Hold it for a few seconds, letting it come up from absolute zero, so's I won't freeze my lungs out when I hit it, as the Kid said.

Alright, and I loosen my hold on the neck, letting the cool, tasteless gas leak out, inhaling a deep lungful. Hold it, squeezing off the breath, exhale slow, inhale, and that's the one that does the deed—oxygen plus freon equals three minutes of hard, hysterical stone that is somehow reminiscent of DMT, with its bucking mad intensity that WON'T LET GO. Everything is my field of vision breaks down into bright fragments, like a brick through a stained glass window. I try to hold onto something, but it's worse than useless—clutching at straws in a hurricane.

I can see it now. . .the looming blue central spark of the All-One, Pure Being, the Void. . .so absolutely-positively IT, that any *me*-existence that gets anywhere near that hole gets sucked in and blown away like a piece of lint falling into a blast furnace . . .*pht*. . .in tiny, tiny letters.

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. . . . . .flash-out. . . . . .
. . . . . .fade-in. . . . . .

XI.

THE REST OF THE TRIP I remember only in fugues—a dreary, flash powder nightmare. . .smoke a thousand cigarettes, not tasting or feeling a one. . .plugging them into numb lips with shaking fingers, spaced, burnt out, blasted. Time passed as swiftly as thought. Impossible as it seems to me now, I stayed in that space the best part of three thousand miles. . .hung *out there* somewhere, trying hard to get back. Trapped in shuttling, timeless no-existence—one tiny, insignificant pulse of energy, in an infinite cosmos of energy pulses.

When I found my way all the way back down and around to where I had started from, a million years lived-time ago—point zero, or a little before, we were leaving the Interstate, exiting toward a mass of civilization that was MEMPHIS TENN., as a huge sign informed us.

The Kid was tight-jawed and grim, as we cruised back streets, looking for something. Or someone. . .

After a bit of this, he drove down a deadend street, parking in front of a white wooden frame house, with tall, unkempt grass growing all around the place. He tried the front door first, then the back, then came back around front, to knock, ring the doorbell and finally, try to kick the door in. But it was a particularly thick oak specimen, and yielded not an inch to all his battering and stomping.

We retired to the car, he rubbing his shoulder, where he had bruised it in one headlong rush against the door. He was stony silent in the car—sluggish, or slow moving, that kind of weakness that comes on, when crashing off a particularly long run. The mind careens. . .free-falling through unmoored space.

He rolled and fired a joint, as we sat in the car, waiting. I don't know exactly how long we waited, but it was bright afternoon when we pulled up, and late night when we left.

When we finally concluded that no one was coming home to this place, I told him to take a rest. . .let me drive.

He got really intense, hollering, "You paranoid fucking scum! You think I can't drive. . .you lousy parasite, I oughtta. . ." he gnashed his teeth crazily, staring at me with a look of such burning hate that I was afraid he would leap on me, and tear me apart with his bare hands. But after a moment he laughed a big, crazy Cosmic Laugh, saying, "Whatsamatter man, can't you take a joke?" He straightened up abruptly, saying, "Anyway, fuck this—we gotta get down to serious business. Find some pinball an' get down to it.

(Cont. on page 115)

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THE STRONGHOLD

*Mark Geston is the author of three novels which have gained for him a growing stature among newer sf writers–*Lords of the Star Ship *(Ace, 1967),* Out of the Mouth of the Dragon *(Ace, 1969) and* The Day Star *(DAW Books, 1972). Here he turns his hand to an unusual confrontation between dying science and reborn magic. . .*

MARK S. GESTON

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

THE CITY has grown terribly old in its four hundred years. The war has left it crushed and broken. Many of its buildings remain standing, but their contours have been gouged and shattered; runs of melted glass streak their sides and catch the light when the sun is low on either horizon. Everything is covered with carbon ash.

There is nothing else. Weeds and strangler vines should have buried the city, but shellings and firestorms scoured away anything that might have supported their lives. The uniform blackness lends an order and purity to the rubble-filled plazas and empty towers. I, made as I am of silver-white metal, walk along its avenues, suggesting the image reflected in the pupils of lovers' eyes.

But I have no eyes, nor can I think why such a simile might occur to me. I can remember neither love, nor lovers, nor the shape and texture of the life the city might have bred had it not been so thoroughly ravaged. I can remember only the war.

For a hundred years before I was brought here, and for two hundred years afterward, the enemy broke itself against the city. Geography made further conquest impossible without its elimination. That much had been obvious from the very beginning, so while the enemy had sent his bombers and battle squadrons against it, we strengthened and rebuilt; we lined its beaches with artillery and impregnable fortifications, filled its magazines with rockets, constructed antennas and observation stations which reached out into the enemy's home, listened to his plotting and charted his movements.

I say "we", and thus ally myself with the city's builders, because I am convinced that a portion of myself is human. I have carefully examined the manuals that were left me; they diagram blocks of

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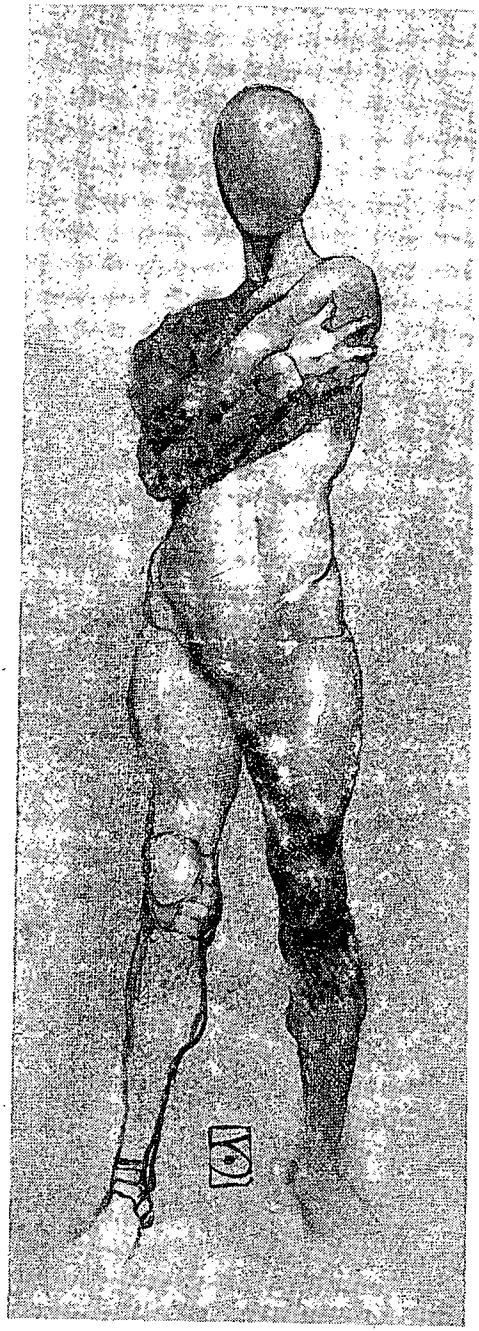
organic tissue suspended in cranial matricies of copper and acid-milled aluminum. My proportions and form, except for the absence of secondary features such as finger and toenails, mouth, nose and eyes, are that of a man. I am aware that the sound of my breathing and my heart, which I hear when I sleep, is only a recording; but if I were fully a machine, what would be the need of such reassurance?

I was brought to the city, I was informed at the time, because the war had become too vicious and deadly. The city could not be forfeited, but men could no longer hold it. Therefore, I was left here and tied to the defenses. I can, by willing it, cause graphs and situation boards to appear in my range of vision. I am able to conjure maps that used to be crowded with arrows indicating enemy activity: blue for the sea, green for subsurface, brown for land, yellow for the air. In an instant I can tell what weapon systems are ready and which are off the line, repairing themselves.

Though I admit my humanity is problematic, my identification with the city is nearly absolute. Perhaps that is why I was given a skin of white metal, so that I would not merge into the charred ruins and become lost even to myself.

The city has twelve defensive walls, and the last one is on the beaches, seventy meters from high water. From there the land



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slopes gradually downward, giving onto the vast tidal flats where I once slaughtered so many of the enemy's landing ships. Two hundred years after his last assault, the flats are still littered with their hulks, and those of the enemy's hovercraft, amphibious tanks and murdered fighter-bombers.

Farther out, more ships are revealed by the slack tide, their size increasing in proportion to the maximum depth of the water. Because of the devices that have been given me in substitution for eyes, I can see the castelated profiles of great battle cruisers and aircraft carriers edging the horizon. When the tide comes in, the water rises into their engine rooms; the enemy's fuels and engines remain active and immense clouds of steam rise over the dead fleets when seawater hits the boilers. The city informs me that some of the fuels are radioactive and that is why this fog glows faintly.

I find it a place of arresting beauty at sunrise or sunset. At low angles the sun strikes the city and loosens the colors that have survived the war; against the blackness there is rust from exposed and severed beams, the silver of imperfectly disguised dish antennas, prismatic radiances from melted glass or crystalized stone. As the dark comes or goes there are also the ghostly fleets and the luminous, turquoise fog rising along the horizon.

For years after the last assault, I directed gunfire and rockets at hulks which I thought might still be functional. Sections of the defensive walls erupted, the fog glowed more brilliantly for a moment and then subsided entirely.

The city permits me a considerable range and variety of perception. As the city explains itself to me through its read-outs and displays, so it tells me what it finds in areas held or coveted by the enemy. The antennas all point to the north or south or directly out to sea; the city's radios are locked into the enemy's frequencies. I have, therefore, an oddly restricted kind of seeing, directed only to those threatened areas and telling me almost nothing of the home we must defend.

For the past two hundred years I have seen nothing of my commanders. The city is self-sufficient, as am I, and there is no need for supplies to be brought in.

I am afraid to leave because then I would have to step beyond the city's ties with me and with the enemy. Though there has been nothing to see for twenty decades, I would feel blinded and lost if I could not continue looking.

That is how I have waited. My commanders have left, as has our enemy. My memories of both remain sharp and exact, transcribed on chromium discs a machine in the city can implant or remove from the blank ovoid that is my

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head at will.

If there was only absence, I might not be concerned. But there is now change within the absence. The density of the tidal fog has lessened, as has its strange half-light. I marvel at the concept of ships taking three hundred years to die. In protected areas of the ruins I have found wildflowers growing. The presence of insects and small mammals has been brought to my attention by the city with increasing frequency. I destroy them only when I conclude that they might interfere with the city's ability to defend itself.

For the past several years there have been men too. They are invariably dressed in an archaic manner, sometimes in laughably ornate armor; at other times they are in the coarse, simple robes of monks or penitents. They approach me with fear, although I am only of average height and took care from the first to conceal my metal skin with appropriate dress. When they roused the courage, they asked me questions as to the extent and meaning of the city.

I tell them: it was held to stop the enemy; those are his works you see rusting on the tidal flats before it.

They seemed ignorant of both the enemy and the war. They named countries and races that might once have been the enemy, or allied with him. But all of these places lie in regions where the city cannot look.

They ask me the reasons why the war was fought and understand none of the answers I have. Instead, they suggest their own reasons, involving needlessly romanticized concepts of love and guilt, all of which are ultimately incomprehensible to me.

Thwarted, I stare maniacly at their human faces (though I have no expression) and think how I have not seen their like in centuries. I know they are of the same race as my commanders because of the memories imprinted on the discs; their form is also the same as my own.

Trying to understand them, I involuntarily call up weather maps over their faces; isobars frame and fix their eyes and mouths. I attempt to reduce their stories to rational patterns by fitting them inside diagrams of the city's defensive rings.

When the large-scale strategic maps are called up, I am confronted with empty geographies. There are no arrows, row upon row of densely printed information below each one indicating the enemy or our own forces. I see only the abandoned coastlines and islands, superimposed over quaintly dressed men in armor, quaking with fear at the sight of me, talking on and on about themselves.

I gather they believe in magic, and in gods and pantheisms acknowledging life in the most inanimate things. There is a discon-

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certing religiosity in the way these men speak, as if they were on missions of their creators', instead of on those in their nations' defense.

They tell me about the world behind the city, and I have no way of knowing if they are speaking the truth.

They have only been passing by the city for a few years, but I have given up trying to explain things to them. They will not listen. They address me by many names, but refuse to understand or hear what I have to say.

Foolishly, because I had no idea how they would react, I began to participate in their blatherings. Because most of their references are to myths or to mythic histories, and therefore only partially understood by themselves, I found it a simple matter to trace the course of these stories, and divert them with fabrications verging farther and farther from the sense they are probably trying to convey. It does not, of course, bring their minds any closer to the matters I desperately need to discuss, but it does lead them into areas where we are, each of us, equally foreign.

At first, I picked my names and incidents from those I knew in the war. The barely-pronounceable names of the enemy's wrecked ships passed for those of myth-kings. Battles and ambushes, also, were easily transposed and shifted around as I composed their own history for them.

The only important thing was to avoid using numbers. So long as I built a world for them made of grand abstractions and vague and indefinitely menacing beauties, they were satisfied. I made myself comprehensible to them by constructing a familiar mystery about myself and the city.

I should not have been surprised when I found some of them trying to burn the city. While the full depth and design of my function was known only to myself, they were paralyzed; my presence presupposed too many options and possibilities, and they could not even be sure if I and my city were really standing there, speaking to them, at all.

The mistake was in thinking that the dreams and myths I spun for them had no life apart from my own. How, my reasoning must have gone at the time, could they animate our enemy's names or compose histories which might have been, only if the enemy's advance had not slackened.

The first one had been dressed in the robes of an abbot: beautifully tailored and embroidered silk, but not so finely done as to exclude any hint of personal humility. I followed him at night, through the city.

It is no illusion that the moon has grown dimmer; the city's photometric scanners report this to me every time it rises. Moments later, ranging dishes inform

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me that its distance from the city is minutely greater than it had been a week ago, perceptibly greater than it had been when the enemy left. But the devices that serve for my eyes gathered what light there was and allowed me to see him clearly.

There was a diagram of the city superimposed over him; his position was marked by a small red arrow. His weight, respiration, direction of travel, blood pressure, and the size and configuration of any metal objects he had with him appeared under the arrow.

Before this, they had always sought me out before entering the city. Although the soles of my feet are serrated stainless steel, I followed him in perfect silence; the city allowed me to hear the tread of his leather sandles and correctly evaluated the size and number of the brass nails in them.

I know every physical aspect and peculiarity of the city as an actor knows his stage and the empty theatre in front of it, where the enemy had sat, spellbound, waiting for the city to falter and fail. But I felt alien and displaced. Involuntarily, I diverted my attention from the man long enough to flash through the maps and situation boards relating to the disputed lands and those once held by the enemy; as for two hundred years, there was nothing.

The moon seemed to dim and draw farther away, although this was denied by the city. I imagined the fractionally human parts of my being, surrounded and supported by the white metals and conceived of their cold, protective binding. I felt more threatened and alone than I had been when the enemy had lined his battleships on the horizon and sent scores of hovercraft skimming toward the city, wrapped in the vaporous fog of their own passage.

The man moved his hands in front of him as he walked, and he traced luminous designs and pentagrams that remained in the air for a second or two. The city reported nothing. When I replayed the discs later, they showed only the gesturing of an old man, stooped under the weight of his years.

The designs brightened, their open spaces closing as the intensity of the hovering fire increased. Still, the city perceived nothing out of the ordinary; ambient temperatures remained constant, no unusual air currents were found among the ruined towers, background radiation did not increase.

Then the man extended this brilliance until it rivaled the shrunken moon, and he played it against the blackened walls. Stones and broken slabs of ceramic-steel laminate glowed irritably; the city forced me to hear the sound they made as they expanded and contracted. I thought it might be like the sound of children screaming, though I have

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never seen or heard a child.

Hidden weapons twitched and swiveled nervously, nervously pleading with me to allow them to define their target. With effort, I refused and kept their shields closed. The city howled and raged at me. Hydraulic circuits that have been unused for two hundred years, except for tests, pressurized; lights blinked on in sealed rooms, and computers sighed and muttered to themselves, obscuring their own mystification with the man by their anger with me.

The city and I knew, however, that there was nothing that could really burn. The enemy had consumed everything soft and vulnerable. (There is an entire block of the city, disguised as a park, where machines are still trying to understand the kinds of fires the enemy had used.)

Over the chattering of the city, I heard him yelling. His light doubled, and then tripled, and only a few more cubic centimeters of the city's glass dripped farther down the facade of a gutted office building.

After hours of this, the light abruptly stopped. The moon was down, and I followed him by the light of the false dawn to the eastern perimeter of the city.

There was a roan colored unicorn hobbled there. He mounted it laboriously and left. The city's defenses reported that his eyes were fixed on the ground, but the lack of retinal dialation indicated that he was blind.

Two hours after dawn I found his position and sent two missiles against him. One used infra-red and the other was a beam-rider; both struck him, the former an instant before the later.

OTHERS FOLLOWED the abbot. Those who sought me out for my grand fabrications diminished in inverse proportion to those who ventured straight into the city, unloosing energies and radiations which, while they harmed nothing, could be neither explained or analyzed. They became better armed and more heavily mounted too; the graceful unicorns, fragile as dawn-light, were replaced by basilisks, dragons and other striding horrors. My province is that of machines and the war we had fought against the enemy; their beastiary soon outstripped my powers of imagination.

I dealt with each of them, though none could touch the city. Stones vibrated in place, towers swayed when there was no wind, and their strange fires did no more than etch random patterns on the twelve defensive walls. The enemy had inflicted more damage during a single commando raid than all their unexplainable lights and devices did in a decade. Still, I began to fear them and the things that they had wrapped about their humanity. My commanders had encircled mine with steel and copper and tungsten, cold and unyielding ex-

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cept where they had cut their invisible joints. These new men carried something softer and infinitely more elusive—and therefore more uncontrollable, I conceived—on their shoulders and out-stretched arms.

I also began to believe that when the enemy and my commanders had gone, they had taken the war with them, and left me and the city and the dead fleets alone. This thought grew upon me. While the city could find me nothing to support it, neither could it find anything to disprove the thesis.

I WAS ENGAGED in a complex program of re-survey and mapping. For a year now, I have been trying to find the exact location of all the enemy's wrecked and sunken ships, as well as our own. Not only those in front of the city, but also all of those within the millions of square miles open to the city's antennas and aerials. I am also trying to learn their names and the names of their captains. I am recording all of this, along with as much information as I can deduce from the endless memories of the city and from the sodden log books its probing devices allow me to read. I am allowing myself the liberty of extrapolation, charting the vanished currents of the war that had escaped the city's notice.

I wonder if I did not become too addicted to story telling when the men first returned. There are elements of the city that persistently classify my findings as "history" and I do not like the finality and loss the word implies.

Yesterday, however, and without my bidding, the city informed me of an approaching band. Because I always withheld my judgment until people had demonstrated an intent to strike against the city, I merely stayed on the beachfront wall, my attention fixed on a destroyer three hundred and seventy kilometers away; by examining her design and manner of construction I had hoped to discover her place and time of building.

The group was larger than most, and the pictures the city brought to me implied an oddly festal air to it. Most of them appeared well-born. There were knights and splendidly dressed ladies with great spotted cats bound to them by chains of silver and gold. The crowd abounded with priestly types, too, burdened with icons and censers that wrapped them in a fog that reminded me of the tidal mists the dead fleets sent up against the tides. Flags and banners stirred to the slightest breath of wind.

They waited, as did I; to the city, I made a great show of identifying the destroyer.

A grid overlaid my double picture of the people and the ruined ship. Confused masses of arrows and dots summerized the group. My vision was taken up with information about its composition.

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In thirty seconds, the city told me the respiration, heart rates, weights, blood pressures, eye colors, strengths and weaknesses of three thousand fifty people.

In its smugness, the city failed to be astonished by the most obvious fact of all; the only way so much information could be acquired was if they were present in lands which the enemy had once held or disputed, the lands both I and the city had been designed to protect.

Through the day, they stood there. The city examined the priests' incense and found it inoffensive; contradictorily, many of them appeared drugged to me.

That they slept as people do, eased my fears. Except for a few enraptured divines, they became more human with the night, kneeling, and then stretching out on the dampening grass. Their leopards and griffins drew taloned paws underneath them, and armored men removed hauberks so that their ladies might sleep more comfortably against their chests.

I, of course, did not sleep. Nor did the city, which informed me, at the moment of the moon's rising, that it had withdrawn another faction of a milimeter since the previous night.

Before dawn, the city detected a barely human presence, walking north along the beaches. It then provided me with maps of gradually decreasing scale; on each one there was a single arrow whose color and shape wavered like a candle flame. I checked the city's main circuits and then had other circuits review the first; I brought the huge, vulnerable dishes out from their hiding places and twisted them around to the south, but they added no more definition to the arrow.

Irregular lines of contradictory information appeared at the perimeters of my vision, stopped halfway through a sentence, erased themselves and then started over again.

I noticed that, inadvertantly, I had focused the whole of the city's perceptive aparatus on that single presence. Fearful of a diversion, I immediately redirected the antennas seaward; they spun and danced to my command. Hundreds of feet in diameter, they caught the growing radiance of the sunrise, but little else. In desperation I had the city sweep the radio bands, but there were not even carrier waves.

I had not attempted active ranging for a century. If I found the enemy, it was likely that he would find the city again. Yet I ordered it, and the city filled the dawn sky with radar, microwave, laser and tropospheric scatterings. If the enemy was still watching, the city would have looked like it was on fire.

I got up and retreated to the seventh wall. I walked along the parapets, dividing my attention between the flickering, indefinite arrow in the maps' southern quadrants and the performance of

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machines that had not been used for decades.

THE SUN CAME UP behind his back as if he were a druidic idol. The local map showed the same arrow, now pointing at the city, centered on the tidal flats seventy three meters before the first defensive wall. At five second intervals, the city tries to give me information as to his character, make-up and capabilities. It always begins with respiration and heartbeat, then falters when skin temperature and conductance should register, and fails entirely with the rest.

I, unaided, clearly note the thickness of his features, and explain the reported lack of pupil dialation by the fact that he has no eyes. It is as if he were carved from stone or iron-wood, and his booted feet have sunk deeply into the tidal sands. He holds no obvious weapons, though I perceive distortions and visual anomolies hovering around his hands and shoulders.

He is human, I am sure; at least in part; but in no less part than I am. It is the thing that has been used to animate him, the same thing that I felt those new men had wrapped around themselves, that puzzles and terrifies me. Golem, the city reports to me. Only the single word, as if it had been accidently found, alone and forgotten in some electronic closet of the city's memory.

How? To what purpose? I question the city furiously. I open the locked radio channels and repeat the questions endlessly in voices the enemy can hear. How? To what purpose? Shocked and embarrassed, the city suddenly lapses into silence, listening with me for the enemy's response.

—MARK S. GESTON

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BARRY N. MALZBERG

TRACK TWO

Like a dog tenaciously worrying at a bone, Barry Malzberg will not let loose a theme until he has stripped from it every insight it holds. Here he grapples with a very basic theme in our culture, that of the Christ. . .

Illustrated by RICHARD OLSEN

TRACK ONE: "Don't be ridiculous," he says, poised on the cross, looking down where a group of the mercenaries now appear to be casting lots over his vestments. Or something of that nature; very hard to tell from this aspect. "None of this is happening."

"You'd better believe it's happening," the man on his right said, "it's happening right now. How long do you think we have, an hour? Two hours? I say less than that." The man on his left mumbles agreement.

He had almost forgotten about the two thieves. Silly of them really; they have been up here all the time with him, flanking him on this damnable mountain, muttering to one another the vague complaints and curses of their profession intermingled with occasional screams of real pain. . .and he had managed to shut them out of his consciousness completely until reminded. Really quite foolish of him. On the other hand, certainly he has an excuse. None of this is happening. All of it is a dream. The two thieves are no more real than the crowds down there milling around, watching the soldiers gambling for his clothing; no more real than the pain of the nails or the blasted heat itself. None of it exists.

"Don't you understand?" he says, quite reasonably he thinks under all these circumstances, "none of this exists. I'm merely having a nightmare. As is well known the kingdom was established and I, the Son of Man, reigned forever and ever just as predicted in the testaments. Of course there was a little bit of difficulty winning the people over to my point of view and you know how the pharisees were, very protective of their position, of course, but that was all to be expected. Actually things went off without a hitch if I say so myself, it all worked out pretty well although now and then I do have these ter-

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rible nightmares about how it might have been if I hadn't been able to prevail and they sometimes have quite a real aspect. Like now. I'm dreaming that I'm being crucified."

"You aren't dreaming, friend," the thief to his left says and "this is no dream at all, pal," points out the one on his right and swinging his head from side to side, seeing the faces of the two, some aspect of the sun comes into those faces, they refract the light; the light bounces off his eyes, then comes into a clear, thin beam which penetrates his consciousness, welds him into position and it occurs to him for the first time that this is really going on for quite a while and he is not waking up and it is really time that he should be waking up but

TRACK TWO: "It's not my responsibility," Pilate says. He is a small, nervous man with a habit of rubbing his palms together as if he were trying to clean them. "No sir, it is not my responsibility at all; I'm not in a position to decide what to do." He winks or at least seems to wink at the soldier escort but it is only a nervous tic for in the next moment all amiability passes from Pilate's face and confusion replaces it. "I have nothing against the man," he says, "I'm in no position to make a decision about this one way or the other. What do you want me to do?"

People surrounding the man

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point out that they would like to see him executed. This discomfits him but he manages to fix Pilate through this with a poignant gaze which locks their eyes together and he thinks then that he is making some kind of connection. He knows that Pilate is not a bad person; actually he is merely a minor political functionary who has been placed in a very difficult position. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks. There seems to be sympathy in his tone.

He shakes his head. Really, there is nothing to say; whatever comes out he will sound a fool. If he says that he is not then he will be taken for a madman but if he says that he is, he will be adjudged doubly mad and in any event what happens to him will have nothing to do with his answer. "Well," Pilate says shrugging, "I suggest that we put it up to a public opinion poll. Ask them outside if they want him back. There's a thief we've got in custody named Barabbas; put it to them this way, they can either have this Barabbas or they can have him. One or the other. That's fair, isn't it?" The escort seems to think that this is fair. Soldiers depart, heading toward the courtyard and for just a moment he and Pilate are alone except for the three sullen men who hold his chains almost tentatively. "You've got to understand," Pilate says, "that I'm in a very difficult position here." He rubs his hands again, then seems to wring them out. "I have nothing against you, it's just a question of the politics here and I'm not equipped to deal with them. Actually I don't know the first thing about the situation."

"It's perfectly all right," he says, "this is just a dream, this never happened and I assure you that you haven't a thing to worry about. Actually, I'm imagining all this. They never brought me into Rome."

"Well," Pilate says with a burbling little laugh, "well, well, *well*, I certainly hope *so*, it would be pretty awful if things like this were really happening, wouldn't it? what a refreshing attitude, that this is all a dream and so on. Well," he says with another wringing gesture, then gives a light little hope, "I'm just glad that you understand my point of view here." He looks up, across him, the escort is coming back. "Yes," he says, "what have they decided?"

"They want Barabbas," someone says.

"Ah," says Pilate with a little sigh, "well, that's certainly unfortunate but Barabbas is an excellent man and has a fine career ahead of him, I am sure. He's very well thought of in certain circles. Give them Barabbas," he says and then turning to him says, "you see, it was a perfectly fair choice, I can't be blamed and anyway, maybe you're right, maybe this is all a dream," and he turns then, waddles toward the

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courtyard, the chains suddenly seize him and he is being dragged away but this is quite impossible, he came into Jerusalem riding an ass but after that everything was entirely different, this is not real, it should stop but

TRACK THREE: "I can't do a thing for you," he says to the woman gently. He is trying not to unsettle her further; really, the woman seems radically disturbed. "I'm sorry that you lost your husband and I'm sure that he's a wonderful man but I cannot raise dead men from the tomb, not even your Lazarus."

"But that's ridiculous," she says, raising her arms, closing the ground between them. Now he has the feeling that the audience has expanded; the woman knows how to play to a crowd and he puts down a sudden bitter flare of rage at her; it is really not fair to him. "The reports were quite definite from the provinces, you turn loaves and fishes and wine from themselves, you multiply objects, you heal people—"

"I'm afraid that the reports are incorrect," he says, "I'm really nothing but a simple carpenter from Galilee who turned to the rabbinate a few months ago because I felt a calling. You know how these stories from the provinces can be exaggerated. Actually I don't perform miracles, the miracles are within ourselves—"

"You're a liar," the woman says. Her face has become constricted; she gestures toward the gravestone. "I know that you can raise him. You can bring my husband back. Bring him back! Bring Lazarus back!"

"I'm sorry madam," he says gently, "you misunderstand the nature of miracles, miracles occur within ourselves a thousand times a day and even to the least of us, the very act of living, loving, drawing breath, knowing God is miraculous and we should praise God and ourselves for having that capacity but as far as this—"

She reaches out and grasps him. Her fingers bend into his wrist like wire. "You're a liar," she says, "you don't want to raise him. If you did you would." She swallows, then her face breaks and she is crying. "You just don't want to," she says, "it's not that you can't, it's that you don't want to. I'll give you money, I swear, I'll—"

"Madam," he says softly, "madam, you misunderstand," but the crowd has moved closer, the air is suddenly sweltering, there is a feeling of vast pressure and closure and he sees that the situation is about to turn ugly. There is no way that he can prove to them at this point that the reports about him are entirely false. "I'm sorry," he says, "I'm truly sorry, I mean it," and waits for this scene like the others to dissolve; having said what he had to say he waits for it to go away and the crowd comes in closer, some of them are cursing, the crowd comes in much closer, it is really time that this dissolved but

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TRACK FOUR: He is on the desert in his thirty-eighth day. "You know," he says to Satan with whom he has become quite intimate during this period; the old angel is the enemy of course but this does not preclude honest affection, even an understanding of shared travail, "I really don't want any of this. I'd much rather go back to carpentry if it were all the same."

"I know," Satan says. His voice is sad. "I've had the same feeling. It's not easy taking on this burden."

"I'm going to be terribly misunderstood and in the end I'll probably be put to death."

"That is very likely."

"And the question of resurrection is a very chancy one. I mean it may well happen but I'm thirty-one years old now and what does resurrection have to do with me? I wanted to lead a simple life."

"We all do," Satan says, sadly again. "That is all we ever wanted, all of us."

"Probably, the only way that I'll be able to get through it most of the time is to make believe that it isn't happening. I'll have to deny the sense of my own mission." He kicks at some sand, discouraged. "It's disgusting," he says, "it's really quite disgusting."

"It is," Satan says, "but what's the alternative? You have to do what must be done. I've had the same problem for a long time."

"I'll probably go through a lot of things and not even accept the reality. I'll say that it's all a dream." He blinks against the sun, inhales the dry, beaten odors of the desert. "Still," he says, "some good will come of it, I hope."

"Oh, I hope so," Satan says mildly. "I certainly hope so. It's been difficult for me for a long time, you know, being alone."

"At least," he says, looking at Satan directly in an honest and appealing way, "at least even if we fight we can agree at some level to be friends, can't we?"

"Oh yes indeed," Satan says quietly. "Oh very definitely. I would hope so."

"Well then," he says. "Well then." It is the thirty-eighth day and he needs a day and a half to get back so all in all matters can no longer be postponed. He has gotten to this point; there is really nothing else to say. "Well then," he says again and extends his arm with a friendly smile, Satan smiling back at him, the sky closing in on the two of them like a blanket, "shall we wrestle, then?"

"Indeed," says Satan and slowly, slowly they mesh. At the first touch of the enemy's arm he is amazed at his strength but as the match begins he knows that his strength is at least equal and as the afternoon goes on he feels Satan begin to weaken. By nightfall he will be on the road back home. They will be waiting for him there. He will have to tell them all about this.

—BARRY N. MALZBERG

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One thing we learned from Watergate was the extent to which the government had been spying—both legally and illegally—upon its citizens. David Bunch extrapolates a time when we are—

AT BUGS COMPLETE

DAVID R. BUNCH

He came in talking, threw a couple of big legs up on my main desk as he took my 2nd-best chair, and he told me in a rush of emotions almost as right and bright as his actions: *"Yippee!* I think I have finally done it—*done it!"*

I looked at this big white-smock scientist type, now moved up to desk-job these several years, and I reflected on many things in a swift moment. "Done it? Done what?"

"A supplement to the Complete Bugger, that's what! This is *it!"*

Well, so—so? Who needed a supplement to the Complete Bugger, the most adequate system of its kind ever devised? Anywhere. And the most complete! But these white-smock types, and they never outgrow that, can never leave it alone. Especially if they're only #2. "File your idea in the proper and have it ready for Committee at the next Open," I said, trying to sound clipped and decisive as well as harsh and commanding, the way I always do with this climber. "And get your feet on the floor! Show some respect for the Command Desk." (These #2 type people have to be kept down, boy, *down!*)

My Second in Command then hurled two big feet away from my main desk, uncoiled from my 2nd-best chair, swift as some outsize oblong snake, and stood there glowering, massive and tall with his fists made, a fearsome tower of hurt feelings and frustration. And danger. I'm a little man myself. I didn't bother to get up. Just as in the old days I didn't bother to up for a playground tussle if I already had the ball bat. I just sat there now and let him have some steel from my steel-blue power-backed stark eyeballs and a kind of laser beam in my voice asked him, "You're tired being #2? Could fix. *Easy!* As you know, the resignations are already written. By me. For everyone but me." Then I changed to sly and snakey-cool, false-friendly and super-helpful, the way only a #1 can do effectively. "Claude," I said, "some-

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times a man does need to change his station. For the good of himself—and others. Morgbawn could assume the duties right today, and I'm sure things would go on very well. Yes! Very well." (Morgbawn is #3.) —"The government would pay transportation."

The big man came apart, as he always did, at the implications. Although I sensed how much he still wanted to pick me up and juice me like a worm between one of his big fingers and one of his big thumbs, he was temporarily crushed now, cowed. I softened a little. I said, "O.K., so I'll listen, Claude. Six minutes." I always try to convey this impression of precious time, *precious time,* don't bother the Boss, unless it's *really important,* he may be *thinking.* (Actually, I'm usually just in a kind of half-awake half-dreaming drowse, watching that clock, waiting for that day-end *squawk* to send me Go-On-Home. And I haven't had a fresh idea myself in ten years. Fact. When you've got a #2 like mine, who needs fresh ideas? My main task is to try to cope with his as well as to see that he doesn't tear the place apart with one of his "inspirations."

"So the Complete Bugger tells us what they're doing, what they're thinking, what they're saying. All of our peon people, ha ha, are completely bugged, aren't they, by the new devices we have placed in the walls of their homes, on the roofs of all their buildings, under the floors of all their structures? It is all standard government bugging, and most of them know about it. They may pretend they don't, but they know. In short, the Complete Bugger tells us *what they do!* At all times. —It's no secret."

His sharp dark eyes grew crafty in his big uncrafty face. It was a combination that often made me want to get up and hit him. But, as I said, I'm a little man. Also, thank all that's bugging, I'm his boss. I knew what was coming. He was setting me up to knock me off balance, a thing he loved to do. "What's the next step from knowing 'what they do'? What's even better?"

This, of course, left itself wide open to many answers. A psychiatrist type might answer, "Understanding why they do what they do." A sociologist type might bring in, "Seeing that they do not want to do again what they did do before, if it is bad for them or the State." A ruthless law-enforcement police-brutality type might just blurt, "Seeing that they don't do a repeat," with appropriate motions of knocking heads in with big-bull monster police clubs.

I just eyed him coldly and let the laser beam in my voice talk as I glanced at the etern-tell on my wrist: "I figure you've got about four left out of the six. You want to conduct a quiz for the rest of it, Claude?"

That shook him loose from the craft in his eyes and set the big

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face to disintegrating and shaking with words. "What's better than knowing what they do? Knowing what they're going to do, that's what. Who has that has complete power. It's the ultimate!" Then his eyes seemed actually to jump forward a little in his head and come closer to me as they fastened on me, while his head remained stationary—a phenomenon I had noticed before and one that was entirely an illusion brought on by his intensity. When my eyes stood their ground, as they always did with this man who had to be kept cowed, he shifted his gaze up to search with zeal the new-steel plates of the ceiling of this all-metal room of our all-metal building at Bugs Complete. Then his eyes came back to look far past me and all through me with that look that the real see-ers of the world have always had. I won't say I didn't envy him just a little right then. It might be hairbrain, but for the moment and so far as he was concerned he was custodian of one of the great ideas of the Universe-World.

"Like big dishpans," he said, "like big super-size soup bowl antennae. We'll fix one for every newborn child in the known world. And by recording day to day their personality and behavior patterns we'll intercept what they're going to become, what they're going to do, what they're going to say, years before they be, do and expound it. It'll be called something like Personality and Behavioral Pattern Prognostics, Government Intercept, PBPPGI! Yeah! That'll do until something better comes along, huh? —We'll tune in on all the baby food and all childhood and teen-age activities by planting little bugs in all the things they'll use. You know how small we've got these things now, down to a bug's bikini, you might, haw haw, say. They can go into the rattles. They can go into the teething rings. They can go into the pacifiers, the bottle nipples, the training pants and the snow suits. And how about, later on, the seams of the Little League baseballs, the girl and boy scout badges, the sneakers and the prom corsages? And on and on, clear into the college Greek pins and the wedding bands. And these things'll broadcast to the receivers—his or her own individual PBPPGI receptor we'll set up for every child at birth—all the things we'll need to know to prognosticate the future of each and all. *Yeah!* Although, of course, naturally, the individual'll know nothing about these things."

"Naturally," I said with absolutely all the dryness, ridicule and censure I could muster for one word.

But he didn't get it. "It will be ultimate, *ultimate* control," he plunged on, "for the man, or men, who control the control rooms of those dishpan and big soupbowl antennae beamed in on the future of every baby in this world!" And his dark eyes were round round pellets now "seeing" the possibility of ultimate power

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of men over other men. "And you know how we'll cross-check it? How we'll really, *really* scan the Personality and Behavioral Pattern Prognostics for absolute accuracy and all-points thoroughness? *Astrology!* Automated Astrology! that's how."

"*Nuts!*" I said. "And your six minutes are up already. I'm sure you have things to do at your desk." By my manner, and from past experience, he knew it was over. There was absolutely nothing for him to do now but leave, and he did that. I faked concentrated bustle and hustle at the Command Desk until he was out of the office.

PBPPPGI and Automated Astrology! Sure, I thought his idea was nuts—now—but I'd file it away in my mind alongside the other hairbrain eruptions of this man who was #2. Later on, months after I'd convinced him he should forget all about it and concentrate more on business at his desk, I'd dig this out of my memory and set my #1 brain to thinking about the possibilities. Seriously. Yeah! Maybe with a few variations to make it seem like my own idea . . . *Hey!* he probably really was on to something with that Automated Astrology!

After all, he had been the one who had dreamed up "my idea" about pre-treated space and the automatic picture frames—PTSAPFGI, the GI for Government Intercept. That's a long one, highly classified and the one that actually brought me all the way up to the top from #5. (He was #6 then, 'way down the line. But I brought him up to 2 at my ascendancy. Where I could watch him. I've sometimes been sorry.) Basically, the idea involves an ultra-sophisticated method of having the "picture frame" always ready when we need it in any area where there might be crime or some suspicious action against the State. The event is automatically recorded in "living color" when anything moves to change the object-to-object spatial interrelationship status quo in any area we choose to bug. Sure, we get a lot of unnecessary pictures, billions and billions and billions of them. Like it might be just a box falling from a warehouse stack, because temperature-change, say, had rearranged something in a teetery storeroom pile. Or maybe shot after shot after shot of a little mouse parading across floors in Government Bottoms Grain Loading. But the important thing is this: we also get the picture we need when we need it. And when it's Government, with its unlimited tax powers, paying for the waste frames—

But now the big *squawk* was on, blessed sound, sending me home-on-home from my *hard* day at Bugs Complete. As I strolled by the desk of #2, who was having to sweat late on reports (because he had taken time out to tell me his fresh idea) I said. "*Nuts!* again #2. PBPPGI and Automated Astrology! Haw haw. How nuts can you get!?"—But see you here tomorrow—on time!"

—DAVID R. BUNCH

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fantasy books

The Fantastic Art of Clark Ashton Smith by Denis Rickard. Mirage Press. $3.75.

Grotesques and Fantastiques by Clark Ashton Smith. Gerry de la Ree. $7.50

Reviewed by Bruce Burton

Clark Ashton Smith is best known for his weird fantasies of sorcererous adventure set in the fabled, mythical lands of Hyperborea and Zothique. But there was another side to the remarkable Mr. Smith, for besides being a fantasy writer (120 stories) and poet (800 poems), he was an artist and sculptor creating as many as a thousand pieces of artwork.

The Best Fantastic Art has a startling cover as a snarling, ghoulish gargoyle leers at us looking as if it has been carved by some satanic sculptor for a devilish chapel in the "vampire cursed" land of Averoigne.

Though Smith devoted much of his creative life to his art it has received little attention compared to the considerable fame his gorgeous macabre fantasies have attained in America and Europe, and the bulk of Smith's art remains in the possession of a few fortunate collectors.

Smith began drawing in 1912 soon after the publication of his first book of poetry, *The Star Treader and Other Poems*, and he continued to draw and paint, using any materials he could get, until the 1930's when he switched to carving.

The monster-haunted prehistoric land of Hyperborea is well represented in a lovely landscape of ferns, tall trees, and towering mountains. Smith's art was influenced by his stories as we can see in his drawing of the grim Inquistor Morghi who chased the Wizard Eibon to Saturn in "The Door to Saturn."

The famous sorcerer Eibon, author of the notorious *Book of Eibon*, arch-mage of primal Hyperborea, who recently has appeared in two stories by Lin Carter, "Shaggi" and "The Uttermost Abomination", is not forgotten. The Hyperborean wizard is carven in a small piece of brown porphyry.

The sorcerer wears a sad, sinis-

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ter smile that suggests that he knows much more than he cares to tell. He wears a tall black wizard's mitre, headgear suited to such a clever and daring necromancer.

Tsathoggua, the repulsive demon-god of Hyperborea is well-represented by several carvings. H. P. Lovecraft borrowed Tsathoggua and wrote in "The Whisperer in Darkness:"

"It's from N'hai that frightful Tsathoggua came, you know, the amorphous toad-like god mentioned in the Pnakotic Manuscripts and the Commorion myth cycle preserved by the Atlantean high priest Klarkash-Ton."

The idol-like images of Tsathoggua are squat, grim, and malevolent. One can see in his eyes his plans for reconquest of earth, which is ready to return to the Old One's dark domain. Also, he has an air of smug contentment about him, as he has just finished gobbling up his daily consignment of virgins. Recently, a statue of Tsathoggua gave Conan the Barbarian a run for his money in Carter and De Camp's rousing swashbuckler, *Conan the Buccaneer*.

Azathoth, the "hideous daemon sultan" is represented as a tentacled horror, a mixture of squid and octopus with a hint of superhuman intelligence.

Shub-Niggurath, "The Goat with a Thousand Young" who haunts many of Lovecraft's tales, appears as a blank-eyed alien creature. One of the other carvings illustrated includes "The Sorcerer Transformed", another example of the ghastly fates that can befall overconfident wizards as this one is transmuted into a dog-beast. There are many demonic heads of snarling fanged creatures, and a scaly Harpy, half winged monster and half old one from Yuggoth. There are crawling dinosauric monsters, four eyes things, werewolves, dangerous hashish demons and large-headed aliens, swamp men, goblins, lamias, Behemoths and elephant monsters—all strange creations of the fertile mind of Clark Ashton Smith.

One of the most impressive pieces is the "King of Zothique," an arrogant Emperor with a towering tall hat, photographed sitting on a copy of the Ballantine paperback *Zothique*. Two of the best paintings which Smith did earlier in his career are "Racorne," where an amazed monster-dragon gasps at a tree with multiheaded fruit and "Avalzant," showing a scarlet Satanic demon surrounded by an ocean of flames.

When one looks at these works of art, one gets the uneasy feeling that as soon as the photographer clicked the shutter, the nude, frenzied worshippers of Tsathoggua, Shub-Niggurath and Azathoth, who had been waiting for him to finish, returned to their fantastic and diabolical rituals, croaking homage to the dark and

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dreadful ones who lurk beyond the stars and are on the verge of returning as Earth's masters.

A feeling of ultra-mundane, terrific and venerable antiquity clings to these statues as though they were hacked out of mist-shrouded Hyperborean stone quarries by multi-tentacled monsters after which they were dragged through steaming swamps to decorate massive, titanic temples in Uzuldaroum. Was it possible that Smith was not a sculptor at all, but a *collector* roaming across time and space through bizarre and baleful realms of wonder and enchantment? Did he wander from Cimmeria to Stygia to Sithakkaloth to Cathay and to even more incredible lands beyond?

Also included is a long list of other Smith carvings and paintings whose names alone conjure up visions of magical marvelous adventure. Two carvings were inspired by Frank Belknap Long's creations, "Hound of Tindalos" and "Chaugnar's Cousin." The others have such tantalizing titles as Proboscidian of the Prime, Lemurian Ghost, Sentinel of the Sabbath, Grand Duke of Hades, Thassaidon and for a change of pace, "The Sexologist Head with prying snout and prurient expression, Dr. Kinsey perhaps?" Smith notes wryly.

One of Smith's paintings, "Gryphon Gazing on the Gulf", was used to illustrate H.P. Lovecraft's story "The Lurking Fear," which appeared in a magazine called "Home Brew."

The most devoted admirer of Smith's artwork was H. P. Lovecraft, who, after receiving a statue of Tsathoggua, wrote to Smith:

"Most certainly, this palalogean eidolon dates from a past anterior to the existence of any life principle native to this earth or to our three known dimensions and it carries in every line and angle the spirit and mysteries of its extra-cosmick artificer."

Lovecraft thought highly of Smith's paintings as well,

"What a world of opiate phantasy and horror is here unveiled and what a unique power and perspective must lie beneath it. . .I have never succeeded in evoking even a fraction of the stark hideousness conveyed by any one of your ghoulishly potent designs."

Lovecraft mentions Smith's weird artwork in "At the Mountains of Madness" and in "Pickman's Model," as does August Derleth in "Something in Wood," where a statue much like Smith's "Azathoth" leads its owner to a ghastly doom.

In *Grotesques and Fantastiques* we have an array of Smith's drawings plus a valuable article by Gerry de la Ree on the course of Smith's painting, quoting from his letters to Samuel Loveman concerning his paintings of "red priestess with green hair and eyes, devil-headed bat with vermillion wings, . . . fantastic

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scenes of hunting and warfare, landscapes of stone and colored metals and castles of unknown architecture." Smith's efforts to sell any of his artwork were not successful, though he sold seven illustrations to *Weird Tales* and some other pieces to a few fantasy collectors.

These grotesques and fantastiques make it appear that Smith had been transmitted across space to the strange planet Xiccarph where in the palace of the superhuman sorcerer Maal Dweb, he was allowed to sketch the inhabitants of Xiccarph who came bearing tribute to the languorous wizard who sat in sombre splendor, surrounded by glittering brass automata and writhing plant monsters. Or perhaps he was allowed to see the Mage's menagerie where bizarre animals had been gathered from distant planets to amuse the bored, cynical sorcerer.

We look upon smiling demon-men with scarlet skin, pointed ears and long curved horns, greenish big-nosed creatures, cheerful goggle-eyed monsters, barrel-shaped things with dangling tentacles and plated scales and one creature so horrifying and alien as to be impossible to describe. Also, there are Oriental style priests and warriors, leaf-covered creatures, snake-haired medusas, plus a scaly parrot-beaked creature with long claws.

An extra bonus is twelve previously unpublished poems that are shimmering, haunting and melancholy in a way only Klarkash-Ton can write.

Roy Squires has published a lavish copy of Smith's lovely prose-poem "From the Crypts of Memory" with a color illustration of the line "Languidly we kept our gardens, whose grey lilies concealed a necromantic perfume that had the power to evoke for us the dead and spectral dreams of the past."

This reproduction has a wan and pale man, garbed in funereal brown who tends a garden of lethean lilies while a pink-fruited tree writhes behind him, as a gloomy dark sky and a dying sun glower in the background, creating an air of chill and hopeless melancholy.

For years fortunate thousands quaffed the marvels concocted by the Klarkash-Ton, and sampled his sorcerous potions. But little did they know that he who had cast spells with words was equally adept in conjuring countless strange creatures from mysterious and fabled realms using his knife and brush like a wizard's wand.

—BRUCE BURTON

For another look at Clark Ashton Smith, his writing and his art, see L. Sprague de Camp's Literary Swordsmen & Sorcerers: *"Sierran Shaman," in the October, 1972, issue of this magazine.*

ON SALE SOON
A BRAND NEW CONAN NOVELET,
SHADOW IN THE SKULL.

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Editorial (cont. from page 4)

the Federal government. For documentation of this point, I recommend "How to Create an Oil Shortage" in the March, 1974, issue of *Consumer Reports*. When two consumer essentials like food and gasoline (and heating oil) go up from 50% to 100% in a year's time, the ripples spread ever-outward in our society, and effect the costs of nearly everything else. (For one example, copies of our March issue went on sale in many parts of the east fully a month later than scheduled, due to the truckers' boycotts and slowdowns.)

A letter from Gene Mierzejewski, in Michigan, says in part, "I've been reading your magazines' editorials ever since you took over as editor of AMAZING and FANTASTIC, and I must admit you knew our country was in trouble long before I realized it." It gives me scant pleasure to have been right about this, of course, but it should not have required an sf-trained eye to sight the many troubles that were in the offing when Richard Nixon began implimenting his prejudicial policies.

I am convinced that we will not begin to get a handle on our problems as a nation until this cancerous growth on our government is removed—undoubtedly by the surgery of impeachment. Richard Nixon is beholden to those forces and special interests whose shortsightedness has put us in this mess, and he has to date betrayed absolutely no interest in dealing with them—except to assure the nation in his State of the Union address that "there will be no Recession."

The day of impreachment draws inexorably closer—perhaps the House will have voted impreachment by the time you read this—as one fact after another falls into place. The most recent, as I write this, is the indictment of H. R. Haldeman (no relation, I'm pleased to report, to Jack C. Haldeman II or Joe Haldeman, the sf writers) for perjury. His perjury was publicly supported in August, 1973, by Nixon.

It has become obvious that our president is not behaving as an honest man would in such circumstances. He has steadfastly and for nearly two years refused to cooperate in rooting out the high-level corruption which first surfaced publicly in the Watergate burglary. Since March 21, 1973, he has—by his own admission—been privy to the facts of this series of crimes, facts he has at every point refused to surrender to law-enforcement agencies and officials. This makes him guilty of a crime: the misprision of a felony. It is hard to refrain from the conclusion that his reason for refusing to surrender evidence is that it implicates him more directly.

It has been said entirely too often that our nation could not easily accept the disruption of a presidential impeachment. But, as

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Nixon "fights like hell" to avoid impeachment, our country is suffering one of the most severe economic dislocations it has known since another Republican president gave us the Great Depression of the thirties. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Nixon's corrupt presidency is directly related to the economic chaos we are now struggling against.

3. HOW TO WRITE SF FOR FUN AND PROFIT: Every so often I receive a letter like the one which follows, and every so often I try to answer it here, where my answer may reach a great many more potential questioners and thus stave off additional letters of this sort, for a while, anyway. Tres Thompson, of Omaha, Nebraska, writes:

Dear Ted,

Knowing you to be an author of no-little-repute and editor of a pair of magazines whose merit far outshines all others in the field (Phew! Compliments, compliments. . . .), I have written you first in my search for aid.

I am a seventeen year-old male whose tastes, I am told, run along strange lines. One of these is a much ridiculed sub-culture of literature, known variously as science fiction or fantasy, depending on one's taste and/or vocabulary. Having been an avid reader of such since I first espied a Tom Swift adventure mouldering in a public library, I am now faced with a dilemna. One which you can help solve.

I have become a writer. Finding myself now in possession of a number of stories of supposedly saleable quality, I have come up against a stone wall. *Having no agent, previous experience, reputation, profusion of funds, and the like, how do I break into print? How, pray tell, do I manage to get published?*

My stories have won some small acclaim within my small group of friends (addicted to the genre, too), and a writing award which greatly impresses my parents and teachers, but that's not really what I seek. I have been told that the writing world is a harsh, haphazard, and predatory one; that I would be a fool even to make an effort. Perhaps so, but I want to see those facts with my own eyes. I want to try.

I place myself in your older and far wiser hands. Help me.

THERE IS NO SIMPLE ANSWER to Tres' problem save this: submit your stories. There is no shortcut; one gains experience in only one way.

Most would-be or beginning sf writers make a series of obvious mistakes. The greatest is the assumption that the story will not sell itself—that an agent or a Big Name is necessary. This is simply not true. Paging back through the issues of the last year, I note stories by Janet Fox, Glen Cook,

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John K. Diomede, Karl T. Pflock, Susan Doenim, Jerry Meredith, William Nabors and B. Alan Burhoe, each of whom sold me their first stories without the strength of any prior reputation, purely on the merit of their individual stories. None had an agent, and if any had been published elsewhere at the time I read their submissions, they didn't mention it in their covering letters (several have since appeared in print elsewhere, however).

A question which I am often asked when I speak about sf to high school and college classes is, "How many stories are purchased out of all the submissions you receive from new or unknown authors?" (I presume the questioner wants to know the odds he might have.) I have not attempted to keep track of the percentage during my editorship of this magazine, but during the five years I was an assistant (later, Associate) editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, I did try to compute the odds. I found that one out of every six hundred stories in "the slush pile"—the unsolicited submissions from unknown authors—made its way into print. And this averaged about one a month—or one an issue. (Since it was my task to read all the "slush" at *F&SF*, I took an understandable pride in the publication of one of "my stories —stories I passed on to the editor for consideration.)

Here at FANTASTIC (and her sister magazine, AMAZING), we have published a large number of "first" stories and developed a number of new writers like Gordon Eklund and Geo. Alec Effinger, to name only two. Although it is easiest for a new author to break into print with a relatively short story, I've taken chances on stories which impressed me enough—and Richard Snead's "The Kozmic Kid" in this issue is a good example, a short novel from a never-before-published author for whom this is a first sale. (But it is easy to forecast a considerable future for Snead.)

Similarly, *If* magazine, during Fred Pohl's editorship, published an "IFirst Story" in every issue, thus making a virtue of what most magazines will do in any case.

If we—or any magazine—had to depend for material solely upon established authors we would quickly find ourselves with too little to print and, as attrition robbed the field of its established authors over the years, fewer and fewer such authors to fall back upon. Ours is a field which constantly renews itself; the "established authors" of this decade were the unknowns looking for a break in the last decade. (At *F&SF* I rejected early stories by both Thomas Disch and Larry Niven; today both have survived that trauma to hold honored places in the sf pantheon.)

Thus, in actuality any author with a good story can very easily

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break into print. All he has to do is to submit it.

Many beginners wonder if their stories are even read, or whether they are automatically rejected because their stories were not handled by an agent. Well, the powers of an agent are vastly overrated by those with the least experience with agents. In fact, an agent's prime job is not to *sell* a story. His job is to get the best price for an already saleable story, and to act as the author's business manager in dealing with subsidiary rights and reprint sales (foreign sales, etc.), so that the author is free to concentrate on his next story. If your story is rejected by every market (magazine, anthology) to which you've submitted it, it's unlikely an agent could sell it for you to the same markets.

Thus, some agents set a minimum sales figure before they accept an author—one major agency which handles a great many sf writers insists that a writer earn at least $1,000 a year from his writing; this, at 10%, means only $100 a year for the agent, after all. An agent, then, is someone to turn to *after* you've demonstrated your abilities as an author, when the question of foreign sales and TV and movie rights is a meaningful one for you.

What happens to your story if you're Tres Thompson, then?

The first thing you must do with it is to put it into a submittable manuscript form. By that I mean that it must be typed, double-spaced (between lines—not words), include your name and address and the estimated wordage in the upper corner of the first page, and have your byline (the version of your name you wish the story to be published under) directly below the title of the story, in the middle of the page. It is not necessary to repeat the title, name or address on the tops of subsequent pages—just a page number will do.

Once you've done this you have only to decide on the market(s) to which you wish to submit the story. (Keep a list; if you don't sell it at the first place you try, send it to the next, and keep a record of whom you've already sent it to. Occasionally we receive stories which we've only recently rejected, apparently because the author forgot he'd already tried us with it.) Place the story in a 9x12 envelope, and enclose with it another 9x12 envelope addressed to yourself and bearing sufficient postage (stamps, not metered postage—the latter are sometimes not accepted by any Post Office other than the place shown on the metered postmark) for the return of your story. If you do not include a self-addressed return envelope and postage most magazines will not guarantee the return of the story if it's rejected, and you certainly don't earn any brownie points with whoever must deal with your story. Address the outer envelope to what-

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ever magazine or market tops your list, put the correct postage on it, and mail it. That's all.

Some would-be authors feel a covering letter is necessary, but too often these letters read like embarrassed attempts to butter up the editor, and embarrass him as much as they must have embarrassed their authors. If you have been published already, but are not yet well known (or if you've made sales but none of your stories have yet appeared in print—a common situation since a story may take from six months to two years to be published after acceptance), it doesn't hurt to give your credits. Not only does it tell the editor that you've already established yourself to some extent, it gives him blurb material in the event that he buys your story. If you feel the need to pass on additional information about your story, or the situation governing its authorship, it does no harm to put this into a covering letter; but remember, the letter should have some purpose, some information to convey. If you feel the story speaks for itself (and most do, one way or the other), leave matters well enough alone—don't bother with a covering letter.

When your story is received by the publication you've sent it to, it is usually placed with similar stories from equally unknown authors—"the slush pile." These stories may be given to a particular editor whose job it is to read them, or they may go directly to the editor in charge of the magazine. Usually the bigger magazines, with large editorial staffs, assign their junior editors to deal with slush pile stories. But most sf magazines are small, and each has its own system for such stories. John W. Campbell, for instance, read all his slush pile submissions himself. I'm not sure, but I believe *Analog's* present editor, Ben Bova, does also. At *F&SF*, Assistant Editor Andrew Porter (who succeeded me) does the job. In the past Gardner Dozois served a similar (but unacknowledged on the masthead) role at *Galaxy* and *If* (with the recent editorial changes at those magazines I'm unaware of their current practices). And here Associate Editor Grant Carrington reads the largest percentage of slush, with Assistant Editor Moshe Feder handling some of the overflow. (Tom Monteleone also lends Grant a hand on occasions.)

If Tres submits a story to us and we reject it, we do so with a rejection slip in the form of a letter (which covers some of the same ground I've gone over above) and offers twelve statements in checklist form which can be marked appropriately to give him a more specific reason for the rejection of his story.

As our rejection slip states (and as most other rejection slips, although less personalized, will also state) "Because of the volume of

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submissions we receive, it is impossible for us to give you the individual comments your story may deserve." When you consider that at *F&SF* I logged an average of six hundred submissions each month, you can appreciate the need for that statement. Manuscripts which are accompanied by letters asking for criticisms and help must be returned without personal comment simply because there is no time for it.

What happens if your story is rejected? It's not the end of the world. Even professional authors pick up an occasional rejection when their stories do not meet the particular requirements of a specific editor. If you feel your story has promise, send it out again and keep sending it out until you've exhausted every possible market. At that point, put your story in a drawer somewhere and forget about it for about a year. Keep on writing and submitting fresh stories during that year. And at the end of the year take out your old story and read it. You'll find that time has lent perspective to the story—you can now look at it more objectively.

What's wrong with it? Your errors and the story's faults will be much more obvious to you now. *Did you enjoy the story?* Was it a story you'd have enjoyed if someone else had written it? If not, why not? One of the most important characteristics of a professional author is his capacity for self-criticism. He must be able to stand back sufficiently from what he is doing to *see* what he is doing and to judge its worth and effect. This comes with experience, as one learns one's craft. And one of the worst mistakes of the beginner is his incapacity to criticise his own work, to separate *its* qualities from his own, to understand that criticism of his story is not criticism of *him*.

For that reason the advice and plaudits of friends and relatives is rarely of value. They see too often the author in the story and not the story itself. Their criticisms are couched in terms of personalities. One of the wisest things a serious beginner can do is to find others like himself and begin a writers' group with them at which each member must submit his stories to criticism from the rest. (It helps if at least one member has some experience in writing.)

Finally, Tres says in his letter, "I have been told that the writing world is a harsh, haphazard, and predatory one; that I would be a fool even to make an effort." Bad advice, that, and obviously from someone ignorant of the realities. The "writing world" is not a place, nor even a sub-culture; it's a state of mind to which one brings one's own attitudes. The *publishing* world is another matter, but one not germane to this discussion. Obviously in a world of competing writers there will be jealousies, even feuds (I've found myself in the midst of more than

(Cont. on page 118)

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Kozmic Kid (cont. from page 85)
Now. . .where's the fucking kit-bag? I feel in need of my heart medicine. . ." rummage, rummage. . .fumble, hunt. . . "God-damnit it was right here. . ." dumping the entire contents of the kit bag on the front seat —there under the streetlight, in front of my horrified eyes, screaming, *"Where are the fucking amyls?!!"*

I grabbed up all the shit —enough dope to put us both away for at least a million years—stuffing it back in the kit bag, panicked, lest some cop got curious about the two strange people sitting by the side of the road in a smoke-filled car for an hour and a half.

I heard a snort, and looked over in time to see the Kid's head dropping against the window pane, a big stoned smirk spreading across his face. He said, "I found the amyls. . ."

He sat up in a few minutes, rubbing his hands together briskly, saying, "Plug in the tape machine, activate the force field—all systems go. C'mon, let's get this cosmos in gear and *do* somethin'!"

It had been raining ever since we hit town—the streets were slick, and choked with fat fog. He took off like he was on the straightaway at a dragstrip, punching smoothly thru the gears, rising, faster, faster. . .

Downshifting at the last possible instant, he took the corner bucking, lurching, wheels sliding, trying for a hold on the treacherous stuff, skidding up on the sidewalk, missing a telephone pole by inches.

"Hey, man, watch out!" I shouted, but he just laughed crazily. He straightened it back out, tooling along up the road about 45, looking for someplace to shoot pinball. . .finally spotting a place, THE HAPPY CORNER, but on the wrong side of the road, across a concrete median.

I ground my teeth in frustration—here we'd have to drive all the way around the fucking block, when the place was right over there. . .

The Kid however, had no such plans. . .he swung out to the right, far enough to get a running start, then cut hard left—jumping the concrete abutment, two wheels at a time. . . It should have been clear, but there were cars coming up fast—lights glaring, horns blaring—scooting out of harm's way with seconds to spare. The drivers' faces went from fear to rage at this totally illegal, unsafe, downright insane move this guy just pulled off.

But the Kid seemed oblivious to all that bullshit. He slid to a stop in the parking lot, leaping out of the car instants after it was stopped. Getting out slowly on my side, I took a good look at the Kid. Under the harsh glare of the blue-white city street lights, he looked bad, *real* bad. He was thinner than ever before—his nose was a fleshless beak, sticking

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out of a sunken, hollow face. And he was pale—my god, the color of peeled plaster, dead, fish-belly white, white to make your skin crawl. Under the light, he glowed blue like a TV tube. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, stuttering nervously in machine gun bursts, "C-c-come on, m-m-man. . ." then turning and sprinting through the back door.

I followed on in a few seconds later, but he already had a quarter in the machine, and was batting the first ball around the table. (It was a Fireball. Isn't that ironic?)

But he played with none of his usual finesse—rather he slapped at it, reflexes a scant fraction of a second off. But he managed to stay on top of it—by main force of concentration.

I played badly myself. It bonked me out three times in succession, the ball draining straight out the middle every time. It was an old, crotchety model. The playing field was black, from wear and usage. . .a thousand balls rolling down through the years. The glass plate was spotted and speckled with various kinds of unrecognizable shit. The chrome at the bottom was caked with a thousand years' worth of spilled beer and cigarette ashes, drying to a hard, mortar-like composition. It was out to get the both of us. And like somebody once said, "If the machine's out to get you, you're gonna get got." Yeah, in spades.

The Kid was of course doing far better than I—by his fifth ball, he had managed to coax it up into the 90,000's. Just a few thousand away from turning it over.

I've seen him do it at least a hundred times, but the old excitement is still there. . *.can* he do it? The tension builds. . .96, 98,000. . .

Suddenly, something happened up top. The ball shot off a side bumper with a ferocious spin, shooting straight as an arrow for the center lane. . .with his flippers hanging open like barn doors. . .

He grabbed the machine up, twisting it with his wrists, nudging the ball left, *saving it*. . .watching it thud uselessly off dead flippers, as the big yellow light came on, screaming TILT. For some reason I flashed on the Kid's remark about tilting being like ego death. I looked quickly up at his face—seeing it go from quick hope at saving the ball, to dejection slumping, when he tilted out. But he looked up at the scoreboard expectantly . . .surely, he would turn it over, even if only by a few thousand. . .

But when the reels stopped clicking, they sat on nines, all the way across. . .999,999. One point away from turning it over. The humor of the situation struck me at once—the weirdness of getting a score like that. I started to burst out laughing, until I looked back at the Kid, seeing another, final

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transformation. . .: from frustrated, pissed off and disbelieving, to cold, lifeless no-hope—his eyes all blown, and hollow-looking, like burned out fuses. . .—gone, without even a goodbye. His heart, wound up like a mainspring that could get no tighter, burst inside him, exploding within his chest and killing him instantly. He toppled, breaking the glass plate with the crash of his unfeeling face, falling to the floor, crumpling amid dustballs and shredded cigarette butts—eyes with no color at all to them, pupils dilated in death, arms flung wide in a final, dying Christ-on-the-cross gesture. . .dead. My friend. . .dead, just like that. Gone.

XII.

THE NEXT FEW hours/days I remember only as a flickering schizophrenic episode—tearing through the streets of Memphis at top speed. Fear stalked me like a ghost—to the outskirts of town, to the Interstate. Then came the showdown.

My shoulders twitched with the electricity of an Unaccountable Impulse. Fear turned to Stark Terror in shuttling, time-frozen scene-shifts in a madly fixed flickering picture show. . .down a ramp, past a sign that screamed in huge, neon-red letters GO BACK YOU ARE GOING THE WRONG WAY.

Everything moving fast now, faster. . .a flickering silent movie continium laced with Fear, Craziness and Suicide. . .brilliantly glaring in a fixed, prismlike gleam were two tiny suns, barreling up the ramp straight at me. . . For a moment, my headlights pinioned the other driver's pasty-white face, frozen in shock and horror—then his car swung off to the left, trundling off the road onto the rolling green of the median. The horn-honks and angry curses still rained down on me, as I stomped down on the brake pedal. . .a dangerous move at speed, on a rainslick entrance ramp. The car sloughed sideways, the wheels screaming in protest. When I finally pulled off on the shoulder and got turned around heading right, I kept running my hands thru my hair, muttering, ". . .Wow. . .phew. . .big. . . strange. . ."

Thinking, *Gotta get my shit together. . .before I kill myself. Somehow, that's it, that's the key. . .at the critical instant, I gave up, let myself lose control, like I wanted to die. . .*

Well, to come right down to it, why not? I don't know what else to do at this point, so I guess it is an alternative. . .

And so, the slinking spectre Suicide joined Madness, the goofy babboon, in the country of my Mind. . .lurking. . .

Sitting by the roadside in the pouring rain, my mind also drenched and drowning. . .in a

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leering case of the Fear. *How long can this doom-struck craziness go on?* I wondered aloud, biting my nails and tearing at my hair abstractedly. Images from out of the near past came flowing up to me in a liquid procession. All scenes of the Kid and me, on different phases of the Trip.

I sat in a daze, hypnotized by the play of scenes against my mind's inner movie screen, while a small, insistent voice whispered, then pleaded, then screamed, "Fuck this! You gotta figure what the hell yer gonna do, first."

I flashed on George suddenly. After all, we were supposed to go back there. . .and I really *was* obligated to at least let them know what had happened to the Kid. . .the reasons in favor lined themselves up convincingly in my mind. And as I watched, the sun broke thru a small rift in the clouds, shining redly for a moment—blood-colored in this evil dawn, all but hidden by gray, scudding clouds, but undeniably there, still the same.

I reflected on this, my second cosmic reprieve from the Powers of Darkness, in the last 48 hours. And well I knew, that the time comes when you have to cut your losses and get out of the game. I decided then and there to pull back, hunker down and get myself together, and take off for George and Sanctuary at the first possible opportunity. But just now, I wanta take it real slow and easy, and let the future take care of itself.

So I headed back toward the city at a slow, steady thirty-five miles an hour. . .looking for some place to hideout. Hoping things would get better, but doubting it, really doubting it.

—RICHARD SNEAD

Editorial (cont. from page 114)

one in the past twenty years), but there are also many kindnesses, many acts of generosity. Writers appreciate talent and have often gone out of their way to assist a talented newcomer however they can. I need only point to Barry Malzberg's letter in this issue for an example of what I am talking about.

There's only one way to find out if you have what it takes to be a writer, and that's to *write*. And maybe some day soon your byline will appear in this or another magazine.

4. NEXT ISSUE: The lineup of stories is still not set, although in all probability Lin Carter's "Black Hawk of Valkarth" will be among them, having been pushed out of this issue to make room for the Conan story. However, one item is set: a new instalment of the *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* column by L. Sprague de Camp, this one dealing with the life and works of William Morris. Readers who have been clamoring for the return of Sprague's column will be pleased to hear that he hopes to be doing more in the months to come.

—TED WHITE

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...According to You

Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to According To You, *Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046.*

Dear Charming Editor:

In my seemingly never-ending crusade to enlighten you and keep you in touch with reality, if only peripherally, here cum anudder one.

An itinerant costermonger, passing my door this morn, chanced to drop his wicker basket of smelts and, lining the bottom of the hamper I did espy the March 1974 edition of that charming fanzine you call your own. As we are not permitted the privilege of purchasing salacious material out here west of the Rockies, I seized on the opportunity of seeing what new fashions obtain in stuffing feet into mouths, and exchanged the magazine for a pitted and corroded Arabian oil lamp I had lying about the house. The costermonger went away, smiling evilly, and rubbing the hell out of the lamp. (Today, that man is Alexander Haig.)

Imagine my joy and/or underwhelment to discover that once again you had taken my name in vain. Never miss a chill shot, do you, old comrade? Well, to cut short your confusion (as expressed on page 128 of the variorum March issue), here are the answers to the matters that seemed to fuel your brow so deeply.

I did not tell Larry Laurent of the Washington *Post* that my books sell more widely than those of anyone else in the sf field. (However, that phrase "more widely" could merely mean "over a wider area," rather than gross numbers of copies sold. A friend advised me he bought a topy of *The Glass Teat* [*Reviewed favorably in the November, 1970, issue of* AMAZING SF STORIES *by the "Charming Editor"*–TW] in Pago-Pago a couple of years ago, and he assured me mine was the only sf name on the racks; but I don't guess that's what we're talking about, is it? Just a thought.) Mr. Laurent, it happily turns out, is not only the TV editor of the *Post*, he is a big fan of my work. Aren't you pleased to hear that? Well, anyhow, he came to my house to

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interview me and, I suspect, he was trying to be charitable in describing po li'l me as a "widely selling" author. Mere hyperbole on the part of an enthusiast, Friend Ted, no muck to rake there, sorry to say. I'll freely admit Heinlein, Clarke and Asimov sell more books than I do. Also Herbert. But pretty quick thereafter you'll find The Kid doing very nicely, thank you.

As for the remark about science fiction being an old term "according to Ellison" which is now considered a pejorative, why you cunning little devil, you, that was an incomplete quote as well you knew. I mean, didn't you say in your remarks, "It's hard to know how much was lost in translation between Ellison and his interviewer"? Didn't you? Sure you did. So of course you knew there was more to the remark than that. [*Faulty Logic, there.*—TW] But isn't it peculiar how people could get the idea you were righteously zinging me for making such a pompous-ass statement? *I* know you wouldn't come off with a crotch shot like that, Ted ole chum, but hell, *you* know how fans are. . .they read so very slowly, moving their lips all the while. And we wouldn't want them to get the wrong idea, would we?

So. Be advised I said "science fiction" was a term *I* considered inadequate for what was being written today, a term that in the minds of casual readers conjured up either views of giant ants eating Falls Church, Virginia, or Buck Rogers. I said *I* preferred speculative fiction, as Heinlein had suggested it in 1940 or thereabouts, but that even that one didn't really make it. I said I preferred *no* label at all. Now isn't that more in keeping with the kind of things you've been hearing me say for about twenty years that we've known each other and disliked each other, Ted? Sure it is.

Well, listen, it's been just swell having a chance to talk things over with you like this, Ted. I really enjoy our little get-togethers, and I'm sure your reader (stet singular) will be wide-eyed with joy to have the record set straight.

If anything else troubles you about my life and words, feel absolutely free to just plonk them down in your magazine and I'll try to unravel the skein as time and boredom permit. Until then, just keep punching, baby.

And as they say in the comic books, this is the first letter I have ever written to a real big-time editor, and I *dare* you to print it, Mushy.

Charmingly,
HARLAN ELLISON
Sherman Oaks, Ca., 91403

And it's good to hear from you, Harlan, even if it takes a quote from a newspaper interview to elicit it. Since Lawrence Laurent is not a "big fan" of my work, he did not confide in me the extent to which he misquoted you, but I'm

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glad to have you set the record straight. (Oh, by the way, were you accurately quoted in your recent Vertex *interview?)* —TW

Dear Ted:

Re your blurb to "At the Institute" in the just received March 1974 FANTASTIC: I really didn't intend, strictly speaking, publication on that but on second thought it's perfectly okay and sets the record straight where it *should* be set straight (in a magazine which has published more of my short fiction than any of the others) and not in *Analog* responsive to the contretemps there which is something else again.

I continue to be in awe of what you've accomplished with these magazines.

[*From a later latter:*] It took me some time—obviously!—to get to Brian Stableford's piece on "The Sociology of Science Fiction" in the current FANTASTIC after my letter of last month but I did and am glad; this strikes me as one of the more important critical essays to come down the pike for a long time in our field. . .in fact, since Budrys, lamentably, threw in the towel at *Galaxy* over three years ago, there's nothing to equal it.

I think Stableford is right. I think that for the most part the genre serves sub- (or extra-) literary needs and thus emphasis on its history and development as a form of literature, conforming to the rules & requirements of same, is essentially *obiter dicta*. The level of our best writers is inestimably higher than it was, say, twenty years ago but beneath that negligible and abstract "best" things strike me as no different or possibly a little worse. There are a whole series of reasons for this but Stableford has put his finger on one of the most significant.

Of course, and as the man says, his article is merely an abstract. If this is going to be a thesis, I hope he'll try and find a university or commercial publisher; I would very much like to see it.

Incidentally, it is not necessary for Stableford to run himself down (he describes his work as having "no literary interest") to make his point and he doth protest too much. He is the absolute best writer who has come into the field in the past couple of years.

His argument is pretty tight. I am in the process of phasing out of this field (and, gradually and if I can afford it, out of fulltime writing) and if in twenty years anyone is curious as to why this is so I will refer them to Stableford's essay and my own *Herovit's World* in equal parts. Shake well.

BARRY N. MALZBERG
Teaneck, N.J., 07666

We have on hand and will be publishing fiction by Brian Stableford in forthcoming issues. May I quote you in the blurbs. . .? —TW

Dear Ted:

The very presence of Brian

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Stableford's article in the March FANTASTIC is alone worthy of congratulation, so I won't take you or him too hard to task. But like a lot of good criticism it provokes a response.

My specific motivation for writing this, and indeed for writing it as from the S.F. Foundation, is because I feel that what he has to say about the Foundation should be answered, but I'll come to that in a moment. His article taken as a whole seems to say that the better writers of sf use the "future" as a metaphor for the present, whereas the lesser writers seem to think they *really are* describing a future. If this is what Brian *is* saying, then one can only agree: an honourable method (or "paradigm", as Brian would have it) that goes back at least as far as Jonathan Swift.

I disagree with him, though, when it comes to some of his supporting detail. Especially, his contention that H.G. Wells was not scientific. Wells was an utterly scientific writer. To some, scientific content is a far more subtle thing than mere hardware; science is to a large degree an understanding of the processes and results, and it is this that Wells has. *The War of the Worlds,* which Brian Stableford mentions as an ideative or romantic book (and it is both those things), is so rich simply because Wells was treating the invasion of Earth as a scientific invasion. For just one instance, his understated description of the Martian monsters as evolved human beings makes the unpalatable irony that progress sows the seeds of its own destruction. And that's a scientific message we're just beginning to appreciate in full.

More detailed disagreements: I can't accept that *F&SF* was more "literate" than *Astounding/Analog.* Does Brian mean "literary"? And I think that when he knocked the sf he has himself written he was being disingenuous.

Furthermore, when he says: "the British *Science Fantasy* always presented a higher standard of material than *New Worlds* in the 60s", I begin to wonder where he was hiding his head during that decade.

Setting aside short stories altogether, *New Worlds* in the 1960s was the first place of publication of several of the best novels of the time. It serialized Disch's *Camp Concentration,* Aldiss's *Cryptozoic,* Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron,* Ballard's *The Crystal World* and, on a lighter note, Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero.* It ran a slightly abridged version of Aldiss's *Report on Probability A,* and large sections of *Barefoot in the Head.* It published a long extract from *Stand on Zanzibar.* I can't see anything anywhere in *Science Fantasy* to compare with even one of those. . .and as I said, I'm not even thinking of short stories (which included work like Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and his Dog" and Chip Delany's

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"Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones"). . .

(A small correction to the above paragraph. If you wish to split hairs and count *SF Impulse* as *Science Fantasy* in disguise, then perhaps Keith Roberts's *Pavane* or Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* could well stand up against the formidable opposition).

But I started this letter in the spirit of defending the Science Fiction Foundation. I must of course speak only my own point of view, for I couldn't presume to speak for the opinions of my colleagues on the board of management (which includes such diverse outlooks as those of Ursula Le Guin, James Blish, Kenneth Bulmer, George Hay and John Brunner), or even speak for our maligned Administrator, Peter Nicholls.

Brian Stableford implies that *Foundation* (the critical journal published by the S.F.F.) imposes on its contributors a rigid critical ethic. I suppose here I *can* speak on my own initiative, because from issue number 5 I am the reviews editor. All I can say is that any such implication is pure bunkum, as Brian himself should know, as he himself has written several reviews for us.

However, these quibbles aside, it was most refreshing to read this kind of article in FANTASTIC, and let's hope that in the months to come you can find several more critical articles of a similar, provocative quality.

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
Vice President,
Science Fiction Foundation
North East London Polytechnic
Dagenham, Essex RM8 2AS, England

Perhaps Brian was thinking of New Worlds *and* Science-Fantasy *in their pre-Moorcock days, under the editorship of the late E. J. Carnell.*—TW

Dear Ted:

Brian M. Stableford's "sociological perspective" on SF (March FANTASTIC) is interesting reading, but I certainly hope his thesis does get published, as there are serious problems with his argument as it now stands. The entire affair is far more tangled than he gives indication of. Looking at the sociological function of a literature is often part of literary criticism, though I'll admit he proposes to make the examination preëminent in the case of SF. However, Stableford's position borders on the chicken-or-the-egg syndrome: "the essential quality of SF is to be found in the *attitude* which people adopt toward it"—not "in terms of its literary content." But how can this be? Readers have to be having an attitude toward *some* thing. . .and *that* is largely the literary content. This must be taken into account. His analysis, to be competent, would, it's true, attack the literature from another position, but it would still have to incorporate literary criticism to some extent. He is simplifying too

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much his "wholly different perspective" is not that at all. (And even *I* simplify my qualification somewhat here.)

Whatever SF is "useful for" in sociological terms, that usefulness involves aesthetic quality, even if negligible. Yes, *The Time Machine* can only be read as SF today, by a subculture that didn't exist when it was written—but what of it? People who read the book only for its more superficial SF "topological" features are missing a lot of its literary value, the same kind of value which can be found in the work of better practitioners today. . .who go unnoticed for it.

I don't see why a search for high literary standards is a "wild goose chase." The implication of Stableford's statement seems to be that it is not even feasible to try discerning SF's ideal, "elevated" nature and hence hope to encourage its attainment. This is disastrous if taken seriously—and it is spurious as well. SF may ail, but it shouldn't be left that way as if this were natural destiny. Most of literature outside the field serves analogous "base purposes" for the population at large (and always has) as can SF for its subculture. But there is fine literature also; and there can and should be fine SF. The further implication here seems to be that SF literary criticism is being offered to the people who form the idea of what the field is and who are least able and least care about appreciating it, so why bother? Such a tendency toward business-like disillusionment is also an over-simplification, but one too complicated to be taken up at short length.

The things which support Stableford's argument are real and complex, though. If there's a sociological need for SF, the age manifesting that need has also managed to put it in an economic and otherwise cultural bind which militates against its developing its own strain of independent artistic existence. But also part of SF's predicament, I think, is the fact that it *can* offer something original to literature in terms of formal aesthetic, which is yet to be fully realized (and which must be aided through theoretical criticism); meanwhile more "practical" (sociological, if you will) needs, which are nevertheless tied up with this matter, have succeeded in dominating. Still, in at least one sense—apart from a writer or even genre's "intentions"—what distinguishes Wells from, say, Stableford himself (since he's being so humble in print) is quality of thought and its expression. Different and "higher" purposes will not alone account for literary value.

The point to all this is that Stableford's sociological perspective, thoroughly explored, does have an ultimate value: as a sort of scholarship that can be utilized for more comprehensive literary criticism. Value in literature, and

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even substance, resides in form worked into some relationship with social and overall cultural dynamics; on the lowest level this manifests itself as crude "needs" or "uses" of the escapist variety, in a process largely uncontrolled consciously. The ultimate problem with a sociological perspective is that it doesn't see far enough; it almost looks through the wrong end of the telescope. Instead of discovering the nature of the disease (I use that figuratively), you are simply satisfied with being able to point out the symptoms of something you otherwise don't care to understand. Stableford's is a task that needs doing sometime, but it's only part of an ongoing, much greater job.

If we admit that SF isn't totally irredeemable shallowness. Too many serious attempts have already been made for us to return to *that* premise now.

JEFF CLARK
2272 Union St.
San Diego, Ca., 92101

Readers who have been with us for four years or more will remember Jeff Clark for his Fantasy Fandom *essay in the April, 1970, issue of this magazine. It's good to hear from you again, Jeff.*—TW

Dear Mr. White:

The World of Brian Aldiss' imagination must be truly a well-appointed, fascinating place. His new novel, "Frankenstein Unbound," is very readable and enjoyable. It reminds me of a book written in the 1940s by Hendrik Van Loon, *Lives* in which Van Loon's central characters have a cozy cottage and invite famous historical figures to dine with them. Needless to say the good Hendrik doesn't have the explicit sex scenes the good Brian conjures up.

Please accept my congratulations on publishing "Unbound" which I hope sparks a trend toward this type of tale, readily digested by the layman who may not be hard-core enough for some, I say *some*, of your other authors. Two months is a long wait for the conclusion of this excellent novel.

BRUCE MOFFITT
Box 201
Purdin, Mo.

Dear Mr. White:

I'm not sure where to start, so I guess I'll start with a question. How? With the obvious signifigance of this Aldiss novel, how did you get it for FANTASTIC? It would seem to be an event that even F&SF would want to serialize it.

Is there some reason for Aldiss to have given you this last minute coup that caused you to set aside an entire, preplanned issue? Is Aldiss a personel friend? Is he an enemy who figured giving you the serial would also give you heart failure? Was there a magazine publishing deadline none of the other magazines could meet? I hope you find space somewhere

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in the magazine, in some issue, to answer these questions. I'm sure a lot of others would like to know how you pulled it off.

On to the rest of your editorial; the typography section. You say that many of us readers have come to regard the features as equal in ranking to the fiction. I, for one, rank it much higher than the fiction. Fiction can be picked up in the other magazines and in countless paperbacks—and much of it is better than what appears in FANTASTIC.

You get an exceptional piece of fiction now and then and it adds greatly to your magazine, but it is in the features that you put across the uniqueness of AMAZING & FANTASTIC. FANTASTIC is the most benefited by the features as AMAZING seems to get most of the best fiction of the two.

The Ellison quote. According to my figures, Ellison has two Nebulas and three Hugos for his stories, plus one Hugo for best dramatic production, a *Star Trek* episode that was so greatly changed by Roddenbury that Ellison was said to have been angered by it. He shortly disassociated himself from the show. Even giving him *that* Hugo—I find his total to be six.

Fritz Leiber has picked up two Nebulas and *Five* Hugos, all for fiction. My total for Leiber reads seven.

Poul Anderson likewise has five Hugos and two Nebulas—total seven.

I can be argued that Leiber's two Nebula stories were also two of his Hugos, the same with Anderson, thus giving Ellison the lead in awarded stories. I find though, that a double awarded story speaks of its excellence enough to counter balance the extra stories that won one award but lost the other. One award counts as one award.

I mean to take nothing away from Ellison, he's one of the greatest writers of all time, but an inaccuracy is an inaccuracy. Ellison's books are big sellers, for sf, unquestionably, but I concur about the doubtfulness of his sales being higher than those of "Heinlein, Clarke, Asimov, Silverberg." I'd add to that list: Bradbury, Burroughs (which sell greatly to this day), and I would have to say Norton, Leinster, Sturgeon and E. E. "Doc" Smith.

Many members of the Science Fiction writers of America may be interested to learn that the term "science fiction" is out. And "considered pejorative" by whom? Enough.

The Stableford article was interesting. How about getting some of his fiction? Leiber's sf film listing wouldn't match mine very closely, but it's all a matter of taste. His fantasy and horror taste seems better developed.

He mentioned that "doubtless I've missed some good ones." Has no one seen or liked *Fahrenheit 451*? Maybe everyone just has it in for Bradbury because he has

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confined his work of recent almost exclusively to the high pay mainstream market.

WAYNE W. MARTIN
Rte. 1, Box D-64
Macclenny, Florida 32063

P.S.: Checking my records on the Ellison awards, one of his stories, "Ticktockman", was a double winner. That puts him in a tie with Leiber and Anderson if you only count stories and still behind if you count awards. When counting the Ellison winners before, I just hadn't noticed that "Ticktockman" was being counted twice like Anderson's "Goat Song".

That was just for clarification, it doesn't change my point. One award is one award. Ellison is still behind Leiber and Anderson seven to six each.

I expect the principal reason we got "Frankenstein Unbound" is that of publishing schedules. The novel had already been published in book form in the United Kingdom–where we sell only a few hundred copies anyway—and was slated for early publication here in book form. (In fact, we had another Aldiss novel on hand as well, which even we could not slip under the wire before scheduled hardcover publication.) Most of the other sf magazines in this country are locked into much longer-term schedules than we are, and our flexibility on this has more than once brought us novels no one else could fit into their publishing schedules. As it turns out, this issue is also a revamped issue—and not the "original" and postponed March issue I'd planned—because the Conan story came in quite recently and we decided to publish it in place of Lin Carter's solo Thongor adventure (which will be in a forthcoming issue). Ah, but that's what makes editing these magazines an ongoing adventure.—TW

Dear Mr. White:

FANTASTIC has been notably uneven during the last year, but takes the high ground again with the March issue. A very fascinating mix it contains, too.

Getting the new novel by the best science fiction writer in the world—Brian W. Aldiss—is a major coup and the first part of *Frankenstein Unbound* is well up to his standards. Thoughtful, witty, entertaining, with quite marvelous scenes in which the protagonist interacts with Byron, Shelley and Ms. Wollstonecraft, this will surely be a worthy Hugo candidate. (In all of 1973, in my opinion, there was only one true novel award possibility—Clarke's *Rendzvous with Rama*.)

The issue also has intriguing short works by Nelson, Malzberg, Bunch and Busby. I wonder if R. Faraday Nelson can be persuaded to become Ray Nelson again? His former byline matched the great vitality in all his work, while the present one is quite stodgy. Incidentally, you miss a few works in

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your introduction. Nelson published a story in a 1965 *Gamma*—I believe entitled "Food"—and appeared in *Again, Dangerous Visions* with "Time Travel for Pedestrians." He also collaborated with Philip K. Dick on the Ace novel, *The Ganymede Takeover*.

Fritz Leiber's review reinforces my feelings of regret at never having seen an Ingmar Bergman film. Leiber's lists of favorite film works in the field are interesting. I wonder if he has seen Lindsay Anderson's 1973 work, *O! Lucky Man*—a contemporary picaresque fantasy which starred Malcolm McDowell—and Woody Allen's current *Sleeper*?

Although one might quibble with a few of his comments—particularly in comparing Verne and Wells—Stableford's article is very stimulating. Disturbing, too, if Stableford and Toffler are correct in saying that large segments, if not most of our population can ameliorate future shock by consuming science fiction. As matters stand right now, in view of the fact that a minute fraction of the people read science fiction in any appreciable amount, and leaving strict academic, literary criticism aside, critics trying to discover what science fiction really is, and is likely to continue being, ought to turn their backs upon Thomas M. Disch and cast their gaze in the general direction of *Star Trek*. To me that is an infinitely depressing thought.

ROBERT WERNER
U.S. Army Dental Clinic #9
Selfridge ANGB, Michigan 48045

Dear Ted:

I'm one of these nuts who goes around reading the editorial and the letter column and all before he reads the stories in a sf 'zine, and you really crossed me up with the March FANTASTIC. The editorial was news, not opinion, the letters were (relatively) dead, the book review was fair (who told Fritz Leiber that *The Poseidon Adventure* was a SF film?), and Brian Stableford's article was interesting. But the fiction was *great*!

Aldiss's novel, *Frankenstein Unbound*, what can I say. An important novel serialized in a magazine. Frankly, most sf serials read like the author is counting words as he goes, but this seems to be a labor of love for Aldiss, and the only bad thing about it is that I have to wait two months for Part II.

I liked B. Alan Burhoe's "His First and Last Women", but I suspect you'll catch a lot of flak about it. Robert E. Howard fans will hang you for "blasphemy", and the moralists will come out of their closets or wherever with the biggest barrage since you published Malzberg's "On Ice". And speaking of Barry N., I've honestly got to say that his "At the Institute" was the weakest of the March stories. It seemed awfully reminiscent of the brain-washing

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sequence in *A Clockwork Orange*. By the way, *Orange* has been re-released, and all sf fans who were too young to sneak into the theatre last time it played should try to catch it this go-round. It's worth the money.

You really got some good reading together in the March FANTASTIC. Keep it up, and I won't bitch when you raise the price to 75¢.

DAVID TAGGART
Chandler Road
White River Jct.,
Vermont 05001

Well, Dave, your timing was pretty good with that last remark–and I'm going to hold you to it.—TW

Dear Ted:

I've just finished reading Frank J. Hayes III (FANTASTIC, March 1974) letter about my and Joe Staton's character *E-Man* and found it to be deeply enjoyable. Although I am respectful of Super Heroes I can't seem to write a Super Hero story in total seriousness since too many situations almost demand a light or tongue-in-cheek touch. *E-Man* also affords me the opportunity to write my favorite form of literature —Science fiction—and the publishers of *E-Man*, Charlton Publications, have assured me that despite the recent paper shortage *E-Man* will continue to be published.

As for Joe Staton I can honestly say that if it weren't for him I would never have created this character since it was his satirical approach to comic art and Sci-Fi that inspired *E-Man*'s personality and abilities.

I would like your permission to reprint segments of Mr. Hayes' letter in *E-Man*'s letter page, E-Mail. We would mention where the letter was first printed and we would be greatful for your co-operation.

We thank you for printing Mr. Hayes' letter and we thank Frank Hayes for writing it.

NICOLA CUTI
Ass't Managing Editor
Charlton Publications Inc.
Derby, Conn., 06418

Permission granted—and my best wishes for the continued success of E-Man, Nick. —TW

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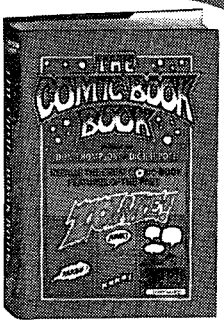

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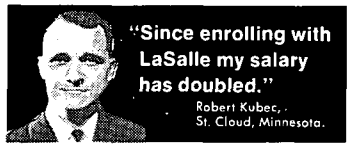

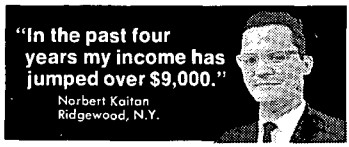

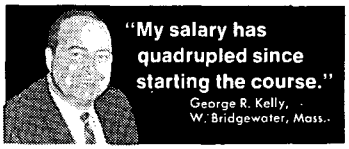

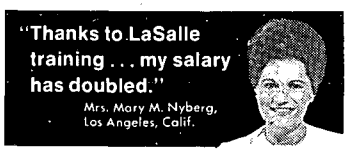

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